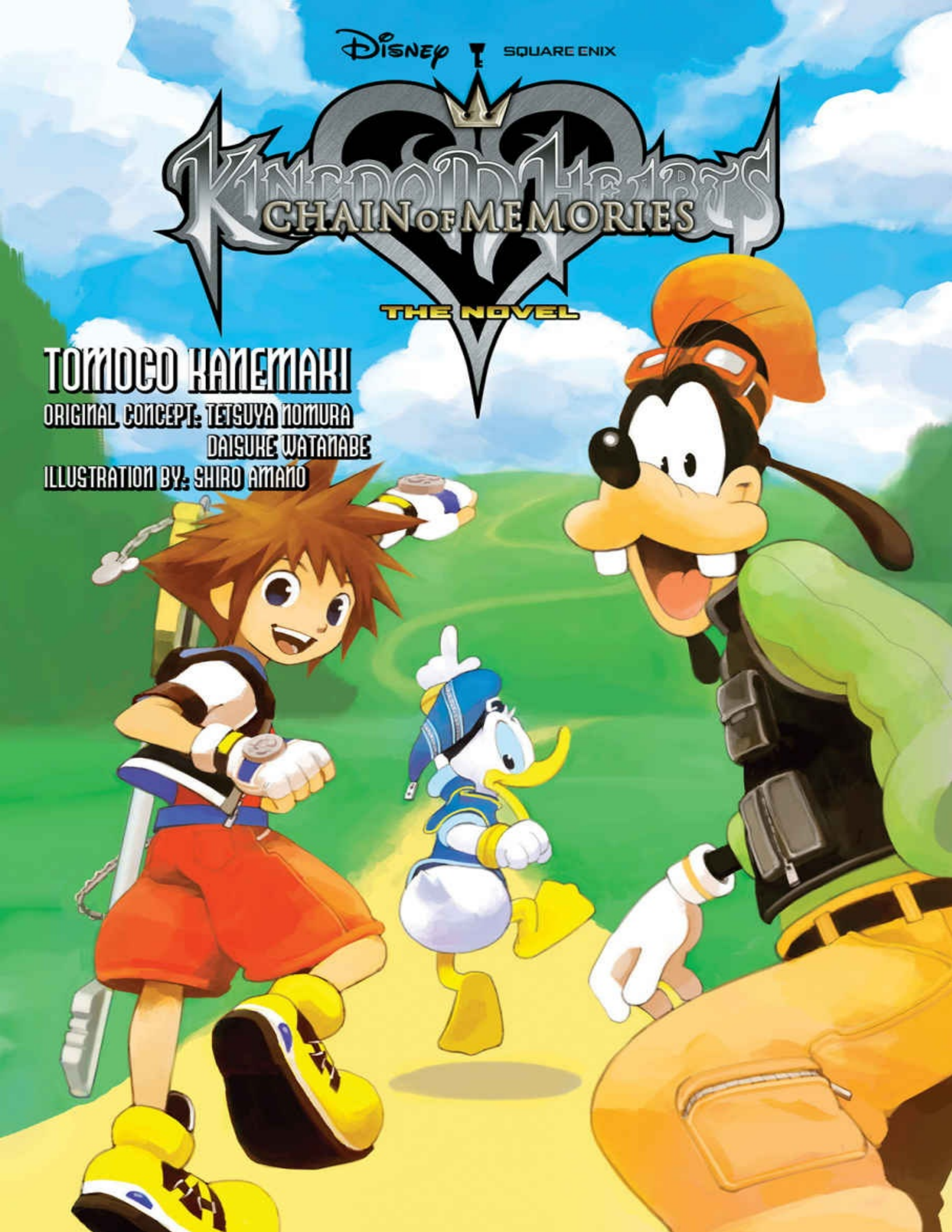
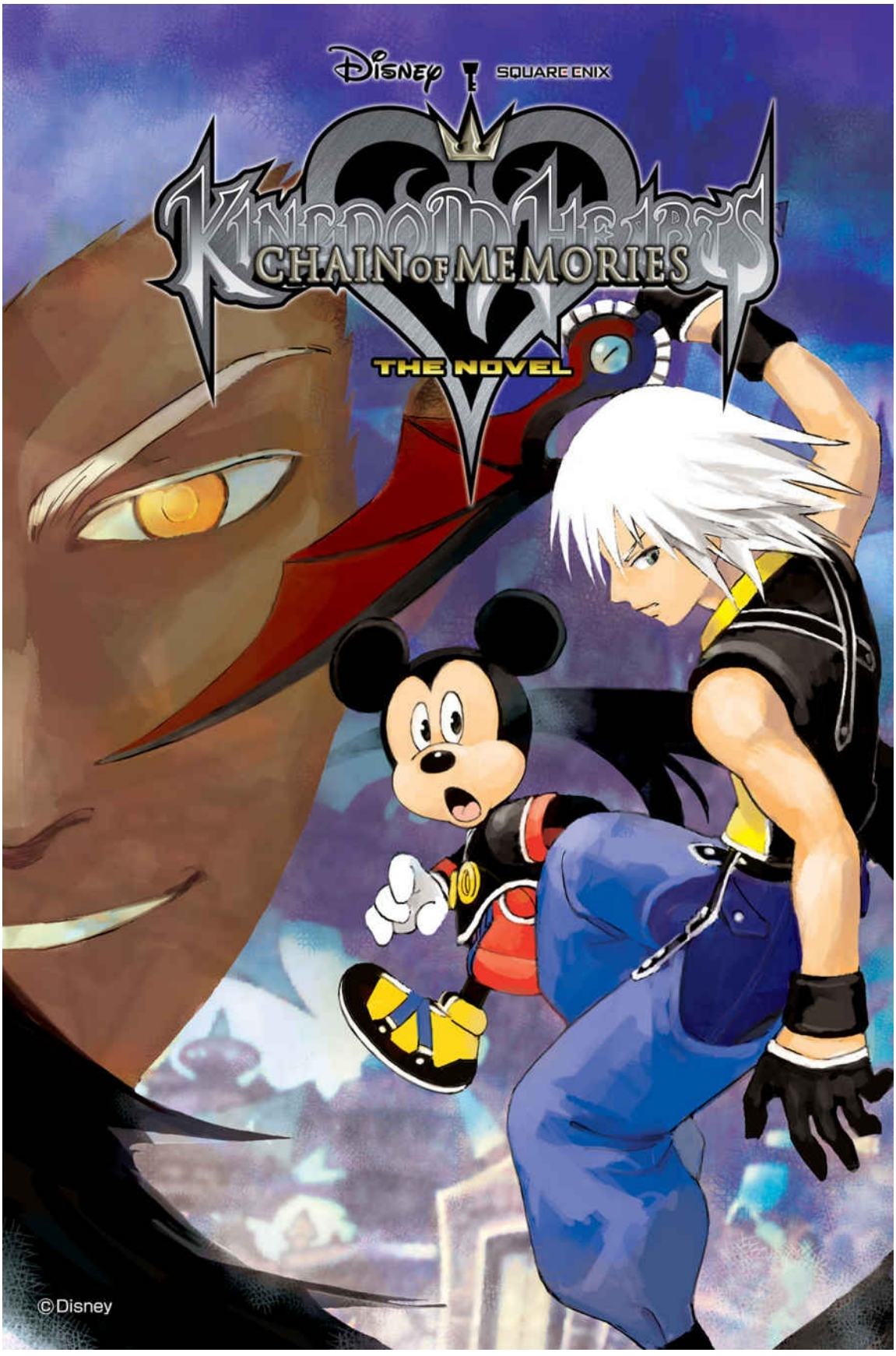

Disney
SQUARE ENIX
KINGDOM HEARTS
CHAIN OF MEMORIES
THE NOVEL
TOMOKO KANEMAKI
ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMURA
DAISUKE WATANABE
ILLUSTRATION BY: SHIRO AMANO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Shiro Amano

《Reverse/Rebirth》

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KINGDOM HEARTS:
CHAIN OF MEMORIES: THE NOVEL
TOMOCO KANEMAKI,
ILLUSTRATIONS: SHIRO AMANO,
ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMURA, DAISUKE WATANABE

Translation by Melissa Tanaka
Cover art by Shiro Amano

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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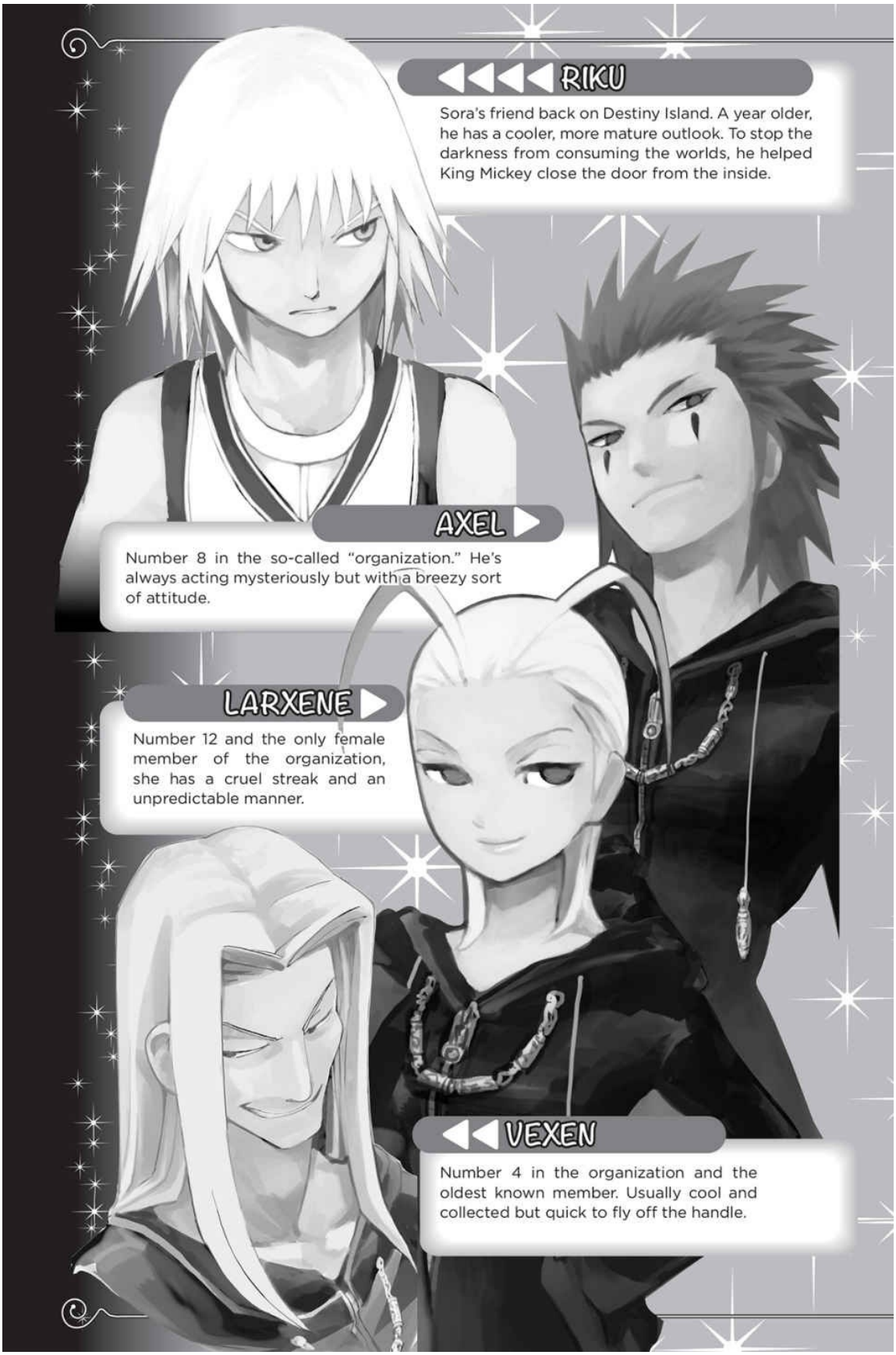
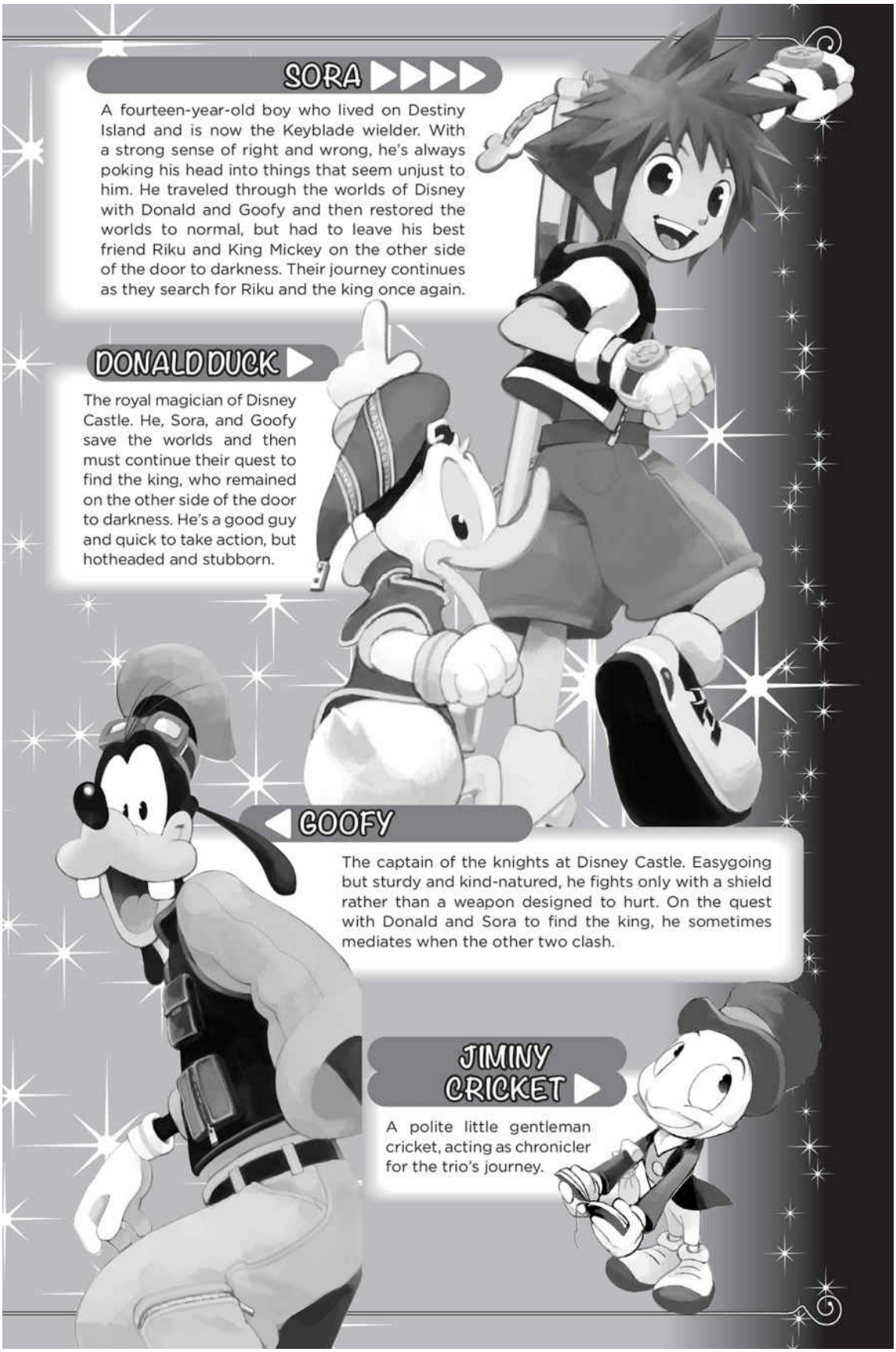
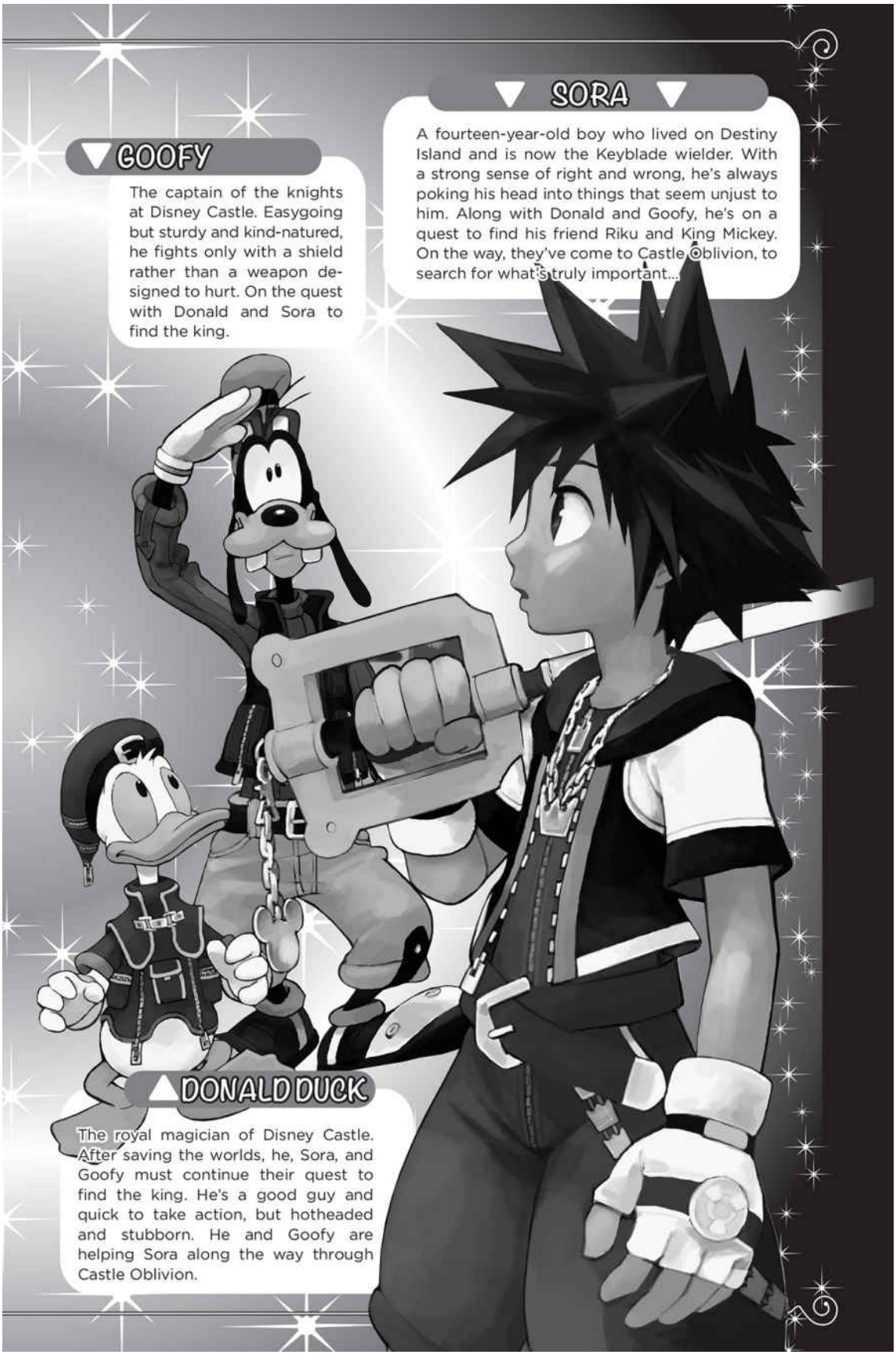
YEN NEWSLETTER

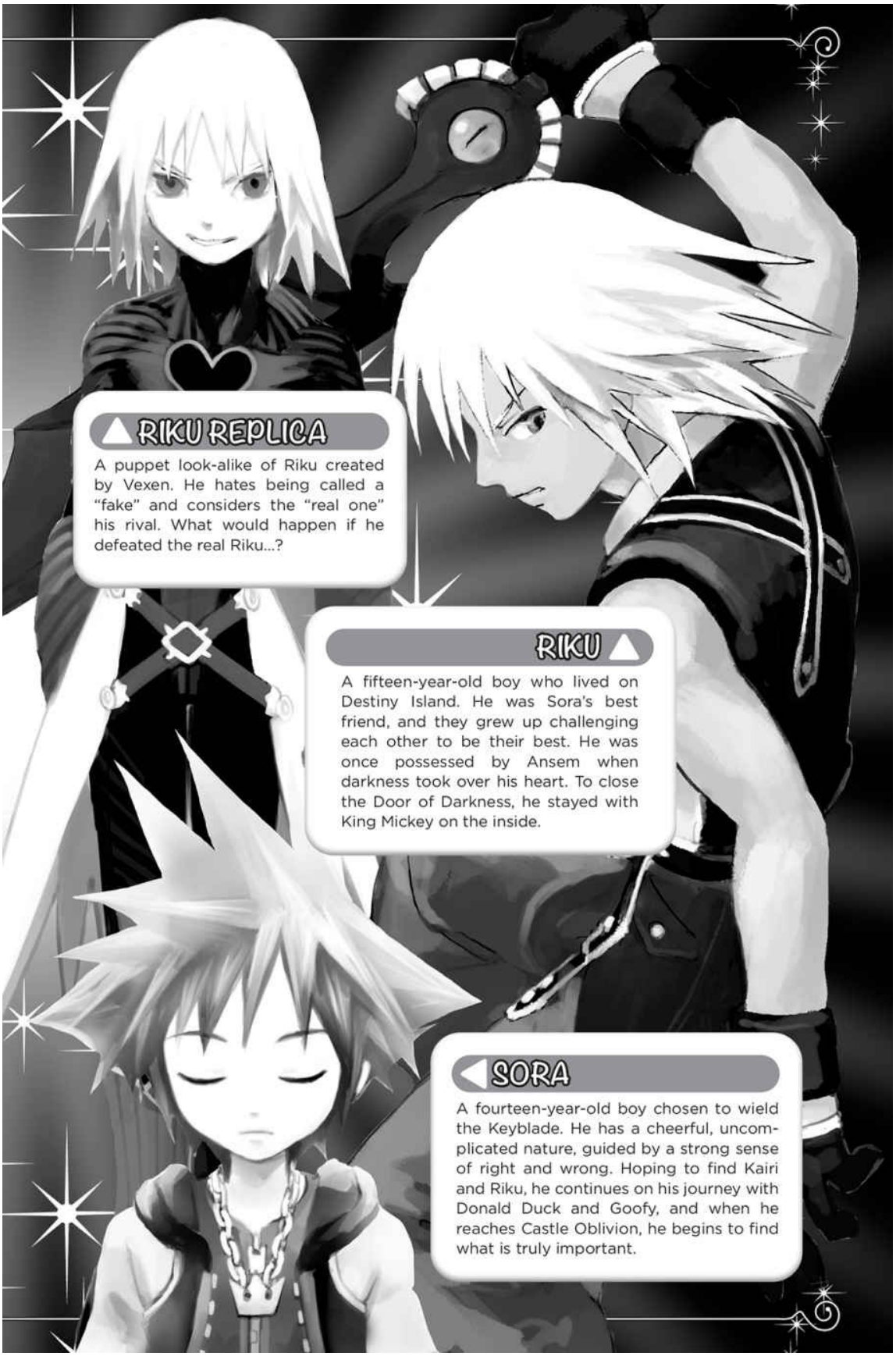

RIKU
Sora's friend back on Destiny Island. A year older, he has a cooler, more mature outlook. To stop the darkness from consuming the worlds, he helped King Mickey close the door from the inside.
AXEL
Number 8 in the so-called "organization." He's always acting mysteriously but with a breezy sort of attitude.
LARXENE
Number 12 and the only female member of the organization, she has a cruel streak and an unpredictable manner.
VEXEN
Number 4 in the organization and the oldest known member. Usually cool and collected but quick to fly off the handle.


SORA
A fourteen-year-old boy who lived on Destiny Island and is now the Keyblade wielder. With a strong sense of right and wrong, he's always poking his head into things that seem unjust to him. He traveled through the worlds of Disney with Donald and Goofy and then restored the worlds to normal, but had to leave his best friend Riku and King Mickey on the other side of the door to darkness. Their journey continues as they search for Riku and the king once again.
DONALD DUCK
The royal magician of Disney Castle. He, Sora, and Goofy save the worlds and then must continue their quest to find the king, who remained on the other side of the door to darkness. He's a good guy and quick to take action, but hotheaded and stubborn.
GOOFY
The captain of the knights at Disney Castle. Easygoing but sturdy and kind-natured, he fights only with a shield rather than a weapon designed to hurt. On the quest with Donald and Sora to find the king, he sometimes mediates when the other two clash.
JIMINY CRICKET
A polite little gentleman cricket, acting as chronicler for the trio's journey.

NAMINÉ
A flaxen-haired girl in a white dress. Under the close watch of the organization, she carries out their orders. She knows something essential to Sora's memories.
RIKU
Sora's friend back on Destiny Island and a year older than him. In Castle Oblivion, Riku is trying to keep Sora and the others from accomplishing anything, but there must be something else behind it—something they don't know...
AXEL
Number 8 in the so-called "organization." He's always acting mysteriously—seeming to support Marluxia's ambitions but dropping helpful hints to Sora, for instance.
MARLUXIA
Number 11 in the organization and one of its founding members. He is in charge of Castle Oblivion. He, Larxene, and Axel are taking advantage of the organization's plans to use Sora—for their own ends.


SORA
A fourteen-year-old boy who lived on Destiny Island and is now the Keyblade wielder. With a strong sense of right and wrong, he's always poking his head into things that seem unjust to him. Along with Donald and Goofy, he's on a quest to find his friend Riku and King Mickey. On the way, they've come to Castle Oblivion, to search for what's truly important...
GOOFY
The captain of the knights at Disney Castle. Easygoing but sturdy and kind-natured, he fights only with a shield rather than a weapon designed to hurt. On the quest with Donald and Sora to find the king.
DONALD DUCK
The royal magician of Disney Castle. After saving the worlds, he, Sora, and Goofy must continue their quest to find the king. He's a good guy and quick to take action, but hotheaded and stubborn. He and Goofy are helping Sora along the way through Castle Oblivion.

NAMINÉ
A girl with the power to unravel people's memories and intertwine them with the new ones she draws. Under the orders of the organization, she is rewriting the memories of Sora, Donald, and Goofy.
LEXAEUS
Number 5 of the organization. Along with Zexion and Vexen, he supervises Castle Oblivion's underground. He's quick to realize what Marluxia and the others are plotting.
ZEXION
Number 6 in the organization, and one of the belowground supervisors of Castle Oblivion. Something of a leader for Lexaeus and Vexen, he is a cunning strategist who prefers to pull strings behind the scenes to achieve his ends.
VEXEN
Number 4 and the oldest member of the organization present at Castle Oblivion. The fact that Marluxia was placed in charge of the castle doesn't sit well with him.


RIKU REPLICA
A puppet look-alike of Riku created by Vexen. He hates being called a "fake" and considers the "real one" his rival. What would happen if he defeated the real Riku...?
RIKU
A fifteen-year-old boy who lived on Destiny Island. He was Sora's best friend, and they grew up challenging each other to be their best. He was once possessed by Ansem when darkness took over his heart. To close the Door of Darkness, he stayed with King Mickey on the inside.
SORA
A fourteen-year-old boy chosen to wield the Keyblade. He has a cheerful, uncomplicated nature, guided by a strong sense of right and wrong. Hoping to find Kairi and Riku, he continues on his journey with Donald Duck and Goofy, and when he reaches Castle Oblivion, he begins to find what is truly important.

SORA'S STORY
PART 1

SORA'S STORY
PART 1

I liked to draw pictures.
Drawing on the bright white sketchbook pages.
Maybe they were worlds from fairy tales…or friends I had yet to meet…

Everything in my world.

I can only draw things from dreams.
Dreams that will never come true. Or dreams that might come true.

These are that person's dreams.
Or are they mine?

PROLOGUE

FRESH START

A SINGLE PATH STRETCHED ON THROUGH THE GRASSY field as far as they could see.

"Well, now what do we do?" said Donald, looking back at Sora.

"We've gotta find Riku and King Mickey," Sora replied.

Goofy sighed. "But, uh… Where do we start lookin' for that door to the light?"

"I dunno, but…"

The three looked at one another and each heaved a sigh.

A brown dog crossed the path in front of them, wagging his tail.

"Pluto?!" Donald exclaimed.

It was the king's dog, Pluto, who had been missing for a while—until now.

"Hey, Pluto, where've you been?" Goofy ran up to him.

Pluto stood there, tail wagging, and they saw there was a letter in his mouth.

"Is that…?"

"It's the king's seal!" Donald rushed to Pluto, too.

"Hey, wait!" Sora ran after Pluto. So did Donald and Goofy.

As they chased Pluto, their laughter rang out over the plains.

…A dream?

Sora woke up, relieved to see Donald and Goofy snoring softly beside him. So it was a dream that they were running across this grassy plain chasing Pluto.

A big round moon was looking down at him.

I wonder what Kairi and Riku are doing now…? Sora sat up and walked through the dewy grass.

Will we really be able to find Riku and King Mickey…?

He stood at the crossroads. They hadn't been able to decide which way to take, so they had settled down to sleep right there.

If the paths just kept on going, they wouldn't want to take the wrong one.

Which way could lead to Riku and King Mickey?

And where did these paths come from, and where could they lead?

Sora stood looking at each of the three other roads in turn.

“Along the road ahead lies something you need.”

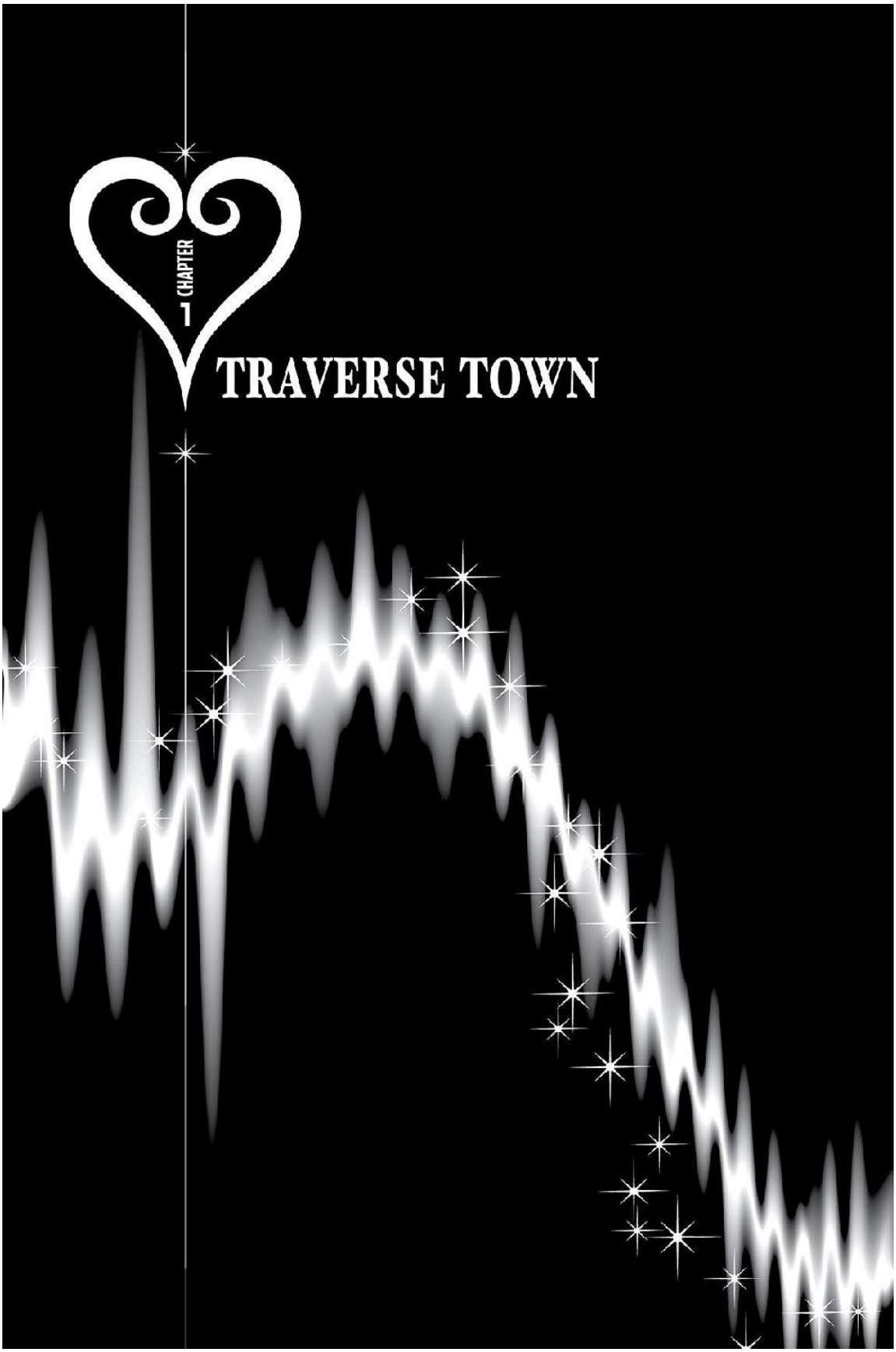
The voice spoke suddenly. Sora turned—but no one was there. Only the grass rustling in the night breeze.

“Who’s there?!” Sora looked all around and then saw someone standing behind him. The man wore a black cloak with a hood hiding his face. Sora couldn’t see his expression.

“However…in order to claim it, you must lose something that is dear to you.”

Holding the Keyblade, Sora stared hard at the dark figure.

But the man vanished, as if he simply melted into the night.


CHAPTER
1
TRAVERSE TOWN

CHAPTER 1

TRAVERSE TOWN

Deep within the castle…
Amid those shining blue-white walls, the plan proceeded, slow and steady.
Light and darkness.
Two heroes.
Above and below.
The “organization” and the “plan.”
Things lost and things gained.
The future in drawings on white sketchbook pages…
“I wonder if I’ll get to meet them…?” murmured a flaxen-haired girl in a white dress. She sat in a birdcage.

“ARE YOU SURE IT WASN’T A DREAM?” SAID DONALD, rubbing his eyes, after Sora poked him awake with the sunrise.

“No, it wasn’t! And he said there’s something on the road ahead!”

“Who did?”

“…The man did…,” Sora replied, losing his confidence a bit.

Maybe it had been a dream after all.

Goofy looked at Donald, then asked Sora, “What sort of fella was he?”

“A man in a black cloak with a hood. He looked a lot like that guy we saw in Hollow Bastion, but…I don’t know if it was the same person.”

Sora hadn’t realized it at the time, but whomever he had met last night really did have a lot in common with that man who had said such strange things to them in Hollow Bastion.

He dashed toward the crossroads—or meant to.

Last night there had definitely been an intersection. But now there was only one long path.

Goofy followed him. “Gawrsh…weren’t there two paths meeting here?” he said, staring down the path.

Donald frowned. “Is it some kinda trap?”

“Well, what do you think we should do about it?” said Sora.

Donald folded his arms. “Well, if your dream wasn’t a dream after all…”

“It *wasn’t*!”

Sora was only getting more uncertain whether he’d really seen that man or dreamed it…but the man had said that something he needed was ahead.

“Okay, then let’s go!” Donald started moving.

“That’s what I think, too!”

Donald broke into a run, as if to give Sora a chase.

“H-hey! Wait up, Donald!”

The three each had the same feeling—a premonition that something was about to begin.

Far, far through the green grass, the path came to an end at a towering castle. The sky had been clear and blue all this time, but here, it surrounded the castle with an unbelievably ominous color.

“Gawrsh!” Goofy stared up at the castle.

“That’s a pretty big castle…,” said Donald.

“It’s even bigger than Hollow Bastion!” said Sora, naming the other towering castle they’d been to not very long ago.

“Hollow Bastion was big, but…it looks like we’d get lost in here,” Goofy remarked.

Beside him, Sora took a step closer, looking up.

It really was an enormous castle. Its green spires stuck out horizontally as well as vertically.

And it gave him such a strange feeling. *What could it mean…?*

“Sora, is something wrong?” asked Donald, after Sora had been staring a while.

“Nothing! C’mon, let’s go check it out!”

They opened the huge gate and walked inside.

“Wow!” Goofy exclaimed. “This place sure is something!”

They were in a room like a spacious hall with walls of white marble gleaming so bright it was dazzling. Flowers carved of the same white marble were set here and there.

“There’s nobody here,” said Donald, glancing all around. There was no sign of anyone in the hall. Not a trace of life anywhere—the place was so empty it felt cold, inorganic. At the end of the hall there was a flight of stairs and a door.

“D’ya think it’s okay to barge in?” Goofy worried.

“But we gotta,” Donald murmured, “if we’re gonna find the king…”

“The king… King Mickey’s here?”

Sora turned.

“Well, I don’t know for sure,” said Donald. “Something just told me he’d be here, okay?”

“Aw, shucks…” Goofy’s shoulders drooped. “But now that ya mention it, I was kinda thinkin’ the same thing!”

“You too, Goofy?” said Sora. “So was I!”

The strange feeling he’d had before they walked into the castle…it was a hunch that he might meet someone here.

“One look at this castle and I just knew. Our very best friends…they’re here.” Sora stared up at the door atop the stairs.

Maybe—no, definitely. They’d find their friends. He was sure of it.

“*A-hyuck!* Great minds think alike, huh?” Goofy said cheerfully.

Jiminy Cricket jumped out of Sora’s pocket. “Wait—hold on! It can’t just be a coincidence!”

“Oh no, Jiminy…” Donald waddled closer. “You don’t mean…”

“Yep! I had the exact same feeling.”

Sora and Donald both looked at Jiminy.

“Gawrsh, maybe it’s contagious,” said Goofy.

“*Wak!*” Donald jumped and folded his arms, looking serious. “Something’s screwy! We gotta go take a look.”

“I think you’re right.” Jiminy returned to Sora’s pocket.

All four of them having the same feeling… Even if it was just a hunch, what could it mean that they all felt the same hunch?

“Okay, let’s go,” Sora decided and started walking toward the door.

“Huh?!” Donald ran after him as if he might stop him. “Where are you going?!”

“That way. To the door. Are you scared?”

“Aw, don’t be ridiculous!” Donald retorted and dashed ahead of him, then stood in front of the door, looking back at the other two. “C’mon, Goofy!”

Goofy looked at Donald standing at the top of the stairs, eagerly waving his wand, and then headed back toward the castle entrance. “Well, we ought to shut the door behind us…”

And just then—

“Sora?!” Goofy yelped, and Sora turned.

There at the entrance was the man in a black cloak.

“Who are you?!” Sora raised the Keyblade.

But the man disappeared, as if to tease them.

“Where are you?!” Sora’s shout echoed in the hall.

And then, in reply to his shouting, the same figure reappeared in front of the stairs.

“Hey! Who *are* you?!”

The man only stood there with his arms folded, unmoving.

“He’s gotta be a Heartless! Let’s see how he likes my magic!” Donald waved his wand. *“Firaga!”*

But the wand was silent.

“Quack?”

Sora turned to see Donald with his head cocked, staring hard at his wand. “What’s the matter, Donald?”

“Firaga! Blizzaga! Thundaga!” Donald waved his wand furiously as if he might shake something out of it. Nothing came forth. “What’s going on?! My magic isn’t working!”

He kept on waving the wand around.

“I should think it’s obvious,” said the cloaked man. “The moment you set foot in this castle, you forgot every spell and every ability you ever knew.”

“What’s that mean?!” shouted Sora.

Beneath his hood, the man smiled a little. “In this place, to find is to lose and to lose is to find. That is the way in Castle Oblivion.”

“Castle Oblivion…?”

“Yes…” The man’s voice turned mysteriously kind. “Here, you will meet people you have known in the past. And you will meet people you miss.”

“Riku? You mean Riku’s here?!” Sora demanded.

“And the king?!” added Donald.

“Do you want to find them?”

“’Course we do!” yelled Goofy.

“If that is what you want…” With those words, the man walked through them—straight through their bodies.

It was a strange sensation, being *passed through*. Sora grabbed his chest. And yet…it was something he’d felt before, somewhere…

“I just touched your memories. And I made this. To reunite with those you hold dear…this is what you will use.”

The man tossed something to Sora.

It was a single card illustrated with a picture of a place he knew. “This is—”

“It’s Traverse Town!” cried Donald and Goofy, both peering at the card in Sora’s hand. It showed the familiar view of Traverse Town they had seen from the Gummi Ship in the Other Sky.

“That is a promise for the reunion you seek. Hold the card aloft and the door will open… Let the cards be your guide.”

“Guide…?”

“Proceed, Sora. To lose and to claim anew or to claim anew only to lose…” And then, with that foreboding statement, the man disappeared again.

“C’mon—let’s go.” Sora climbed the stairs and stood before the door.

“I wonder if we’ll really find them…” Donald looked anxiously up at the door, tightly gripping his wand, which was currently no better than a stick.

“I guess we don’t have much else to go on, besides what that feller told us,” said Goofy.

“Right!” Sora nodded. “Let’s go!”

He held up the card, and the door shone as if responding to it. They walked through.

“This is…”

“Traverse Town!”

Through the door, the First District of Traverse Town spread out before them.

Goofy cocked his head. “Maybe it was a card that transports you to the place in the picture?”

The cobblestone roads…the buildings made of wood and stone. The streetlamps shone down warmly.

But there was no one in the square.

“I wonder where Aerith and Leon went…?” Donald looked all around.

“Didn’t they all go back to Hollow Bastion?” said Sora.

“Oh…right.” Donald’s shoulders fell.

“Anyway, this isn’t really Traverse Town, right? We’re still inside Castle Oblivion.”

A low voice spoke from behind Sora. “Precisely. The town you see is not real. It is an illusion created by your memories embedded in that card.”

When they turned, it was the man in a hooded black cloak.

“You again…!” Goofy held his shield ready.

“What do you mean, it’s made out of my memories?!” Sora demanded.

“I’ll leave that to your imagination. In this castle, you can only move forward by using cards to open the doors. And you may stumble upon memories that were hidden or people who are dear to you…”

The man vanished again.

“…Hey, wait!” Sora ran to where he had been standing, but not a trace remained.

“Memories that were hidden, huh…?” said Goofy, tilting his head.

Screwing up his face, Sora rejected the idea. “I haven’t lost any memories!”

“Well, maybe not…,” Goofy agreed.

What had that man been talking about…?

“I guess we’d better keep going or we won’t find out anything.”

“Uh-huh…”

They’d met a man in a black hooded cloak once before, in Hollow Bastion. But they couldn’t tell if that man and the one who was appearing and vanishing before their eyes here in Castle Oblivion were one and the same.

There was one thing they were sure of—men in black cloaks kept telling them confusing things.

Lost memories. A place where to lose is to find…and to find is to lose.

What was going to happen here in this castle?

“Wak!”

“Heartless!”

The creatures that rose up from the ground were the Heartless like creeping pitch-black shadows, the same as the ones they'd defeated in Traverse Town before.

"Whoa!" The Heartless were rushing at them with their claws raised.

"But I can't fight if I can't use my magic!" shouted Donald.

"Don't worry! Leave it to us!" Sora replied as he and Goofy attacked. The Heartless that appeared in Traverse Town should be weak enough to take down with one blow. But—

"—Ack!" A Heartless knocked Sora flat.

Goofy charged with his shield up, but they knocked him back, too. "*Yipe!*"

"Aw, c'mon— *Firaga! Fira!*" The man had told him he'd forgotten his magic, but with his wand in his hand, Donald kept trying. "*Fire!* Hey, it worked!"

A tiny little fireball leaped from his wand. Compared to what they'd had when they fought Ansem, it hardly counted as magic, but there it was.

Sora got up, shouting, and swung the Keyblade at them over and over. "There!" Attacking with all his might, he'd finally taken out a Heartless.

"Gawrsh, we really have lost our power, huh…?" Goofy said miserably.

"*Wak!* But I can use Fire!" said Donald, waving his wand.

"And I've still got my Keyblade," Sora added. "You've got your shield, too, right, Goofy?"

"But…" Goofy stared at the shield in his hand.

Donald looked up at him. "We've just gone back to where we started!"

"You mean, like when we left our castle…?"

"Or maybe when we first came to Traverse Town?" said Sora.

This feeling—the sense they had of fighting—it was like when they'd first encountered the Heartless in this very town.

"Oh…maybe that's it," Goofy agreed.

"Anyway, the three of us are still together, so we'll be fine!" Sora grinned and thumped Goofy's shoulder.

"You'd better be more careful, or the Heartless will make sure you're not fine at all."

It was a familiar voice. They turned.

"Leon!" Donald shouted with a jump.

Standing there was a man with a scar on his face—Leon.

Sora ran closer to him. "Leon! What are you doing in Castle Oblivion?"

"Castle…Oblivion? What are you talking about? This is Traverse Town."

“Umm… But it’s not really…” Sora looked back at Donald and Goofy. “How can I make this make sense?”

“Anyway, how do you know my name? Who are you?” Leon drew the Gunblade from its place across his back.

Behind Sora, Donald jumped up. “What d’you mean?!”

“Gawrsh, that’s not very nice, Leon!” Goofy protested.

“I’ve never met the likes of you before,” said Leon.

“Never met— Quit playing, Leon!” Sora retorted. “We all fought the Heartless together! You know that!”

They’d spoken so many times…and Leon had helped him, too.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Leon said coldly. “I don’t even know your names.”

Goofy hung his head. “You don’t?”

“Sorry.” Leon folded his arms, looking down at them.

Sora’s shoulders fell and he stared at the cobblestones. “How could you just…forget about us?”

“I feel for you, but you’ve got the wrong guy. It happens all the time. Don’t take it so personally, Sora.”

“…Huh?” At that Sora looked up again.

“You *do* know his name!” Donald jumped.

“Now—hold on!” Leon frowned in confusion, as if he couldn’t believe what he’d said. “Why do I know your name?!”

“You think Leon’s just kidding around?” Goofy whispered to Donald.

“If he is, it’s not very funny!” Donald muttered back, peeved.

“Who’s kidding around, Goofy?” said Leon. “You and Donald are the ones who—”

“Hey!”

Sora and his friends all jumped at once. Leon did know their names after all!

“That…can’t be right… Something’s wrong with my memory. What’s happening…?”

As Leon was getting lost in thought, a cheerful voice spoke from behind him.

“I dunno, Leon. Maybe Aerith was onto something after all.” It was Yuffie. “She said she sensed some kind of uncanny power. Well, this is pretty uncanny. Maybe you should take Sora and his friends to see Aerith.”

“Yuffie! You know my name!” Sora ran up to her.

“Yep! Looks like you know mine, too.” Yuffie turned to Leon, making her short black hair bounce, and grinned.

“You know him?”

“Nope! Total stranger.” She looked at Sora again. “But I definitely know his name. It’s strange, sure, but convenient! We can skip the introductions.”

“How is it that you can accept this situation so easily…?” Leon held his head as if it ached.

“Heh. Well, I’m gonna run ahead and fill Aerith in. Leon, you can give them the grand tour!” Yuffie smiled, teasing him a little, and sprang up high to take a shortcut over the rooftops.

Leon sighed and put away the Gunblade.

“Leon…” Sora looked up at him nervously.

“I guess it’s no use dwelling on it. Come on, follow me.” He took a brisk pace deeper into the First District. The trio followed him.

“Are you taking us…to the hotel in the Second District?” Sora asked.

“You even know *that*?”

“Not really… Well, I didn’t know exactly… I kind of guessed.”

He could never forget the first time he’d met Leon in Traverse Town—not even if he wanted to. *Leon totally kicked my butt that time…*

That gave him an idea.

“Oh, I know! Hey, Leon!” Sora exclaimed.

“What?”

“Maybe you’ll remember if we fight!”

Leon turned and looked at him hard. Sora brandished the Keyblade.

“You…want to fight me?” Leon said skeptically.

“Us, too!” Goofy held his shield ready, too, and Donald his wand.

“Can you guys just watch this one?” Sora told them. “The first time I saw Leon, I fought him on my own.”

“Oh yeah! *Ahyuck! ’*Cos you hadn’t met us yet!”

Donald and Goofy moved back, opening a space for the fight.

“Are you serious? I don’t think this will be much of a fight…” Leon drew the Gunblade again, still looking doubtful.

“We won’t know until we try, right?” Sora grinned and took a lower stance, aiming the end of the Keyblade at him.

“All right…have it your way. Who won this fight in your memory, by the way?”

“…Well, you did… But I dunno about now. Here I come!”

Sora jumped up. But when he attacked with all his might, Leon easily deflected it.

“Shouldn’t you just quit while you still can? There’s no way you can beat me.”

“You don’t know that!” Sora adjusted his stance and jumped again—this time, though, Leon’s Gunblade blew him away. *“Ngh!”*

“Don’t be so reckless. You get the picture by now, don’t you?” Leon put away the Gunblade.

“Sora! Are you okay?” Goofy ran to Sora and helped him up.

“That wasn’t nice, Leon!” Donald shook his wand at him.

“I only did what he asked,” Leon replied. “I don’t know how strong you guys might be—but you don’t really know how to fight.”

“We just forgot, that’s all!” Donald stamped his feet.

“Forgot? How do you forget something like that?”

“Umm… Well, that is…” Stuck for an answer, Donald cocked his head.

“Anyway, let’s go and see Aerith. We can talk more there.” With that Leon turned and kept walking.

It was a room in the Second District hotel—the very same room where Leon and Yuffie had first told Sora about the Heartless.

“I brought them,” Leon announced.

“Welcome back!” Yuffie greeted him brightly, sitting on the bed. Beside her, Aerith smiled quietly and looked at Sora with her blue eyes that seemed to peer into the truth of everything.

But she said nothing. “Aerith, did you forget me, too?” Sora asked her uneasily.

“I don’t know whether to say ‘Nice to meet you’ or ‘Good to see you again.’ I don’t think I know you, but I still feel like you belong here,” said Aerith. “My heart says we’ve met before…but I don’t remember you, Sora.”

“Yeah, exactly! Like we’ve never met, but it still doesn’t feel weird that I know your name.” Yuffie shrugged and grinned, her white teeth gleaming.

“Like we…belong here?” Goofy cocked his head.

“Right, like you’re familiar somehow! I mean, how can I put it—like we met somewhere a long time ago or…maybe not…,” said Yuffie.

“But…we took on the Heartless together and everything!” Sora insisted.

Leon folded his arms and sighed. “It feels like you’re right…but I can’t remember.” He slowly shook his head.

“Then I guess you won’t remember what you told me…,” Sora mumbled. “In Hollow Bastion, when I sealed the Keyhole, you said…”

Donald picked up the cue. "'We may never meet again…'"

"'…But we'll never forget each other,'" Leon found himself saying.

"*Wak!* You do remember!" Donald jumped.

"They're right, Leon! I remember you saying that, too. And then I told Sora, 'I couldn't forget you even if I wanted to.' Didn't I?" Yuffie tilted her head at him, uncertain of her own memories.

"I guess we can't write it off as a coincidence, then." Leon frowned in concentration.

Everyone had that memory—but they couldn't remember meeting these visitors. What could it mean?

"Yes. Our hearts remember—that is, we feel the memories in your heart, Sora." Aerith stood and stepped closer to him and gently took his face in her hands, looking into his eyes.

"Sora's heart…?" Donald said blankly.

"We don't know you, Sora," said Aerith, "but your heart is full of memories of us together."

"Gawrsh, what's that mean?" Goofy wondered.

"Sora's memories must resonate in our hearts, too. Maybe they tell us things we couldn't otherwise know."

"So you're saying that Sora's memories are affecting ours?" Leon asked.

Aerith turned to him, smiling a little. "His memories do seem to have a certain power."

My memories…? thought Sora.

"Maybe it's like that guy said, then… This town is just an illusion, something my memories created." He frowned, sinking into thought.

Aerith turned back to him. "And…there's someone special to you in this town?"

She spoke as if she knew everything.

"How did you know what he said?" Donald demanded.

But Sora just nodded. "Oh… I get it."

"Huh? What do you get, Sora?!"

"My memories are resonating in her heart, telling her what happened." Sora felt like it made sense somehow, to him.

"What's that mean?"

"I dunno!"

Goofy and Donald both tilted their heads in confusion.

"Hmm. I can't really explain it very well, but… It's like you said," Sora told

Aerith. “A friend of mine is somewhere in this town— I mean, in Castle Oblivion.”

“Huh? Castle Oblivion?” Yuffie jumped up from the bed. “What’s that? There aren’t any castles around here.”

“That’s not quite what I mean… Um, it’s… Well…” He had serious doubts in his ability to explain it in a way that made enough sense.

“You’re still not sure what’s going on yourself,” Aerith spoke up, seeing Sora at such a loss. “Right?”

“Right. We just got here, after all,” said Sora. “I want to take a better look around and find out if this is really the Traverse Town we know.”

Donald and Goofy chimed in.

“Yeah, same here!”

“Me, too!”

“Well, this hasn’t begun to make sense yet—but go have a walk around town,” said Leon. “There are Heartless, but that’s no problem for you.”

“So, you know I can fight?” Sora said, quite self-assured.

Leon snorted. “I can’t say I know…but I feel like believing you. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Hey, don’t be such a stranger, Leon.” Sora grinned at him.

“Should I knock you around with the Gunblade again to make sure?” said Leon.

“You can hold off on that… C’mon, Donald, Goofy, let’s go!” Laughing, Sora dashed out of the hotel room.

The trio walked across the Second District square.

“So, you were sayin’… This town is just an illusion your memories created, right?” Goofy asked from behind Sora. “What’s that mean?”

“I told Aerith, too… I don’t really know. It just seems like this world is connected to my memories somehow.”

“But it can’t be an illusion!” Donald shouted, baffled. “We’re standing right in it!”

“Gee, what about me and Donald?” said Goofy. “Are we from your memories, too?”

“…Huh? Umm…I don’t really know…” Sora looked down.

If the town really was an illusion made out of his memories, then how could he tell the difference between the parts that were illusion and the parts that weren’t?

What if the Donald and Goofy next to him now were just illusions? Where were the real Donald and Goofy?

“This doesn’t make a whole lotta sense.” Goofy folded his arms.

But just as he did, Donald jumped up. “Heartless!”

Several of them appeared in the middle of the open square.

“All right, here we go!” cried Sora.

“But, we’re all weak now…,” Donald said uncertainly, tightly gripping his wand, which wouldn’t make anything now but tiny little flames. He exchanged glances with Goofy, who looked nervous, too.

“What’re you talking about? We’ve just gone back to how we were when we met, right?”

“Oh, right! I get it!” Goofy’s smile returned. “Let’s go!” The trio rushed into the swarm of Heartless.

They ran for the door to the Third District. Sora leaned up against it, catching his breath. “Doesn’t it feel like we got a lot stronger just from that?”

“Yeah! I can use Blizzard now, too!” Laughing, Donald waved his wand around. Ice crystals stuck on the end sparkled.

“It’s like the strength we lost is comin’ back, little by little,” Goofy said brightly.

If they had just been booted back to the beginning, there wasn’t any reason to get discouraged. All they had to do was keep going forward, and they would get stronger again.

Sora held the Keyblade in both hands above his head and stretched.

“Huh?” Donald exclaimed, as he was about to waddle into the Third District.

“What’s the matter?” said Goofy.

“It’s Cid!” Donald ran toward him.

He had a bellyband over a white T-shirt and goggles pushed up over his hair —just the same as the Cid they remembered.

“Cid!” Sora followed Donald.

“Hey, whaddaya know. It’s Sora!” Then Cid paused and scratched his head. “…Hm? Sora? I’ve never met you before… But you do look like a Sora, what with the spiky hair and baggy pants…”

“It’s okay, Cid. That’s my name.”

Even if the Cid they were seeing wasn’t the real one, just the Cid from Sora’s memories, it still felt nice to be greeted by a friend.

“Well, uh, what do you guys need?” asked Cid.

“A friend of mine’s supposed to be somewhere in this castle— Er, in this town,” said Sora. “Got any ideas?”

Cid tilted his head, thinking. “Your friend, huh? Lately all this town sees is Heartless. Can’t take two steps without gettin’ ambushed. In fact, this plaza’s the worst.”

“The worst how?” said Goofy.

Cid looked up at the bell tower that rose from the gizmo shop in the Second District. “Word is, a jumbo-sized Heartless shows up when that bell rings.”

“Huh—I wonder if it could be…” Sora looked at Donald and Goofy.

They had fought a huge Heartless in this very square. And that was…

“If you value your hide, you’ll get out of here while the gettin’s good.” With that Cid left the square.

“Gawrsh, maybe we should leave, too,” said Goofy, stepping backward.

“But don’t you want to see what shows up?” said Sora.

“No, we *don’t*!” Donald snapped.

They were all remembering the thing that had appeared before. It was a Heartless like an enormous suit of armor, with hands and feet that came off to whirl around—the Guard Armor.

Suddenly the bell rang. Donald jumped “The bell! C’mon—let’s get out of here!”

And with a terrible rumble, something fell out of the sky—the Guard Armor, just as they had suspected.

“There it is! Run!” Donald was trying to escape, but Sora caught him.

“We’ll be fine. When we faced that thing, that was the first time we’d ever fought together, but we worked together and beat it!” Sora set his shoulders, not scared at all.

“But I don’t have all my magic!”

“You couldn’t use very strong magic back then, though, right?”

They spoke over the clanging sound of huge metal footsteps as the Guard Armor stomped closer to them.

“Yeah, but…” Donald looked like he still wanted a way out of the battle.

“I’m gonna fight, Donald.”

“Goofy?!”

“Back then we didn’t know each other too well, but we sure do now,” said Goofy. “We know how to fight together. We’ve still got that, so there’s no way we can’t be stronger than we were!”

“And *maybe* we won’t be able to beat it without your magic!” Sora looked

into Donald's face, grinning.

"All right! Fine!"

"That's the spirit!" Sora turned and leaped at the Guard Armor, which was already close enough to hit. Goofy and Donald did the same.

"Hah!" Sora sprang up higher. He wasn't as strong as he remembered being, but he could jump just as well. The Guard Armor's hands waved back and forth, attacking, and he swung the Keyblade at them.

"Fire!" Donald hit it with magic and Goofy rushed in with his shield. Just like before, they were fighting as one.

First they took out the Guard Armor's right arm, then its left, and then its feet, one after the other. And finally the torso…

Almost as if they enjoyed it, they faced off against the Heartless dozens of times their size.

"This is it!" Sora jumped even higher than before, and he felt the impact on the Keyblade. "There!"

The Guard Armor fell like a puppet with its strings cut and lay still, then turned to light and disappeared.

"Huh?"

The door to the wizard Merlin's house in the Third District wouldn't open.

"What's with this thing?" Donald pushed and pulled, but the door stayed tightly closed.

"Did you find your friend?"

The voice that hailed them was Leon again.

"Uh… Hey, Leon, what's through here…?" asked Goofy, a little confused.

"Through there…? I don't think you can *go* through there."

"But there's a door— Wha—? It disappeared!" Donald tapped the bare wall with his wand. He'd just been trying to throw his weight against it—but there was no door, only a brick wall.

"What's going on…?" Sora cocked his head at it and turned to see Leon and Yuffie, as well as Aerith and Cid. "Hey, guys…"

"So your friend wasn't here, huh?" said Yuffie a little apologetically.

"No, I don't think I'll find him in this town… But he's somewhere in this castle," Sora replied, determined. "I just know it."

Riku was here somewhere. Sora was sure of it.

"Castle?" Cid folded his arms. "Like this whole town's inside some humongous castle? Hoo…that's rich."

“We might not be able to understand it, Cid,” said Leon, “but Sora and his friends do. They can see that reality is bigger than just this world.”

“I wish I was that sure,” Sora mumbled. He was starting to get less certain of what was illusion and what was real. A door disappearing right in front of his face—what could that mean?

“You’ll be okay, Sora,” Leon told him firmly. “No matter what shape reality takes, you can handle it.”

Yuffie grinned at him. “Take care, Sora.”

“I’m a little lost, but…best of luck anyway,” said Cid.

“Oh! Wait, how do we leave this town?” Sora asked.

“Well—”

Leon and the other Traverse Town citizens looked at one another uncertainly.

“There’s a door, right over there.” Aerith pointed to a corner of the Third District square.

“Huh…?” Sora looked at the wall—or it had been only a wall. Now there was a door. “What’s going on?”

Aerith quietly shook her head.

“Whatever! We can get somewhere else through there. C’mon, Sora, hurry up!” Donald ran toward the door as if he couldn’t stand still a moment longer.

“Hey, wait!” Goofy went after him.

“Umm, but…” Hesitating, Sora was about to follow them anyway, but Aerith called to him.

“Sora, wait.”

He turned back to her.

“I don’t have all the answers, but I had to tell you something.” She looked terribly sad somehow.

“Aerith… What’s wrong?”

“Your memories created this town, right?”

“That’s what the guy who gave me the card said.”

If the man in the hooded cloak was right, everything in this world was an illusion…

“If that’s true,” said Aerith, “then this town is just a figment of your mind… and so are we.”

“But…you can’t be a figment!” Sora exclaimed. “You’re standing right here. The town is here, too!”

Even if this place was made out of his memories—he just couldn’t believe that.

“But I’m not really me,” she went on. “I don’t remember the things I should. And I sense things I shouldn’t.”

“Things you shouldn’t know…?” Sora frowned, thinking hard. How did Aerith know things that she had no way of knowing? Because she had some kind of special power, or…?

“Sora… Beware your memories.” She pronounced the words slowly, giving them weight.

“Beware? How?”

“In the journey to come, you’ll be faced with more illusions. The shadows of your memory might deceive you, try to lead you astray…”

Sora could only blink at her. This wasn’t making much sense. *The shadows of my memory…?*

“So, uh… What exactly does that mean?” he asked finally.

“I’m sorry. I’m just another illusion. The truth is out of my reach.” Aerith looked down disconsolately.

“Don’t say stuff like that,” Sora blurted. “It’s depressing…”

Leon and Yuffie, and Aerith and Cid were all just illusions? He didn’t want to think about it.

“Stay strong, Sora. Don’t let the illusions distract you from what’s truly important.”

At that Sora stood up taller and nodded.

“Soraaa!” Donald was yelling for him from over by the door.

“Maybe we oughta get going,” Goofy added.

“Yeah, I’ll be right there!” Sora replied, and then turned to Aerith again. “Well, I’d better go.— Aerith?!”

She wasn’t there at all. He looked around frantically. Just what was going on?

“Sora, what’s the matter? We’re gonna go without you!” Donald shouted.

“Aerith’s gone! But I was just talking to her! And Leon and Yuffie and Cid, too—they were right here! I thought we’d get to say good-bye to them!”

“What’re you talking about? There wasn’t anybody here!” said Donald, sounding exasperated.

“Huh?”

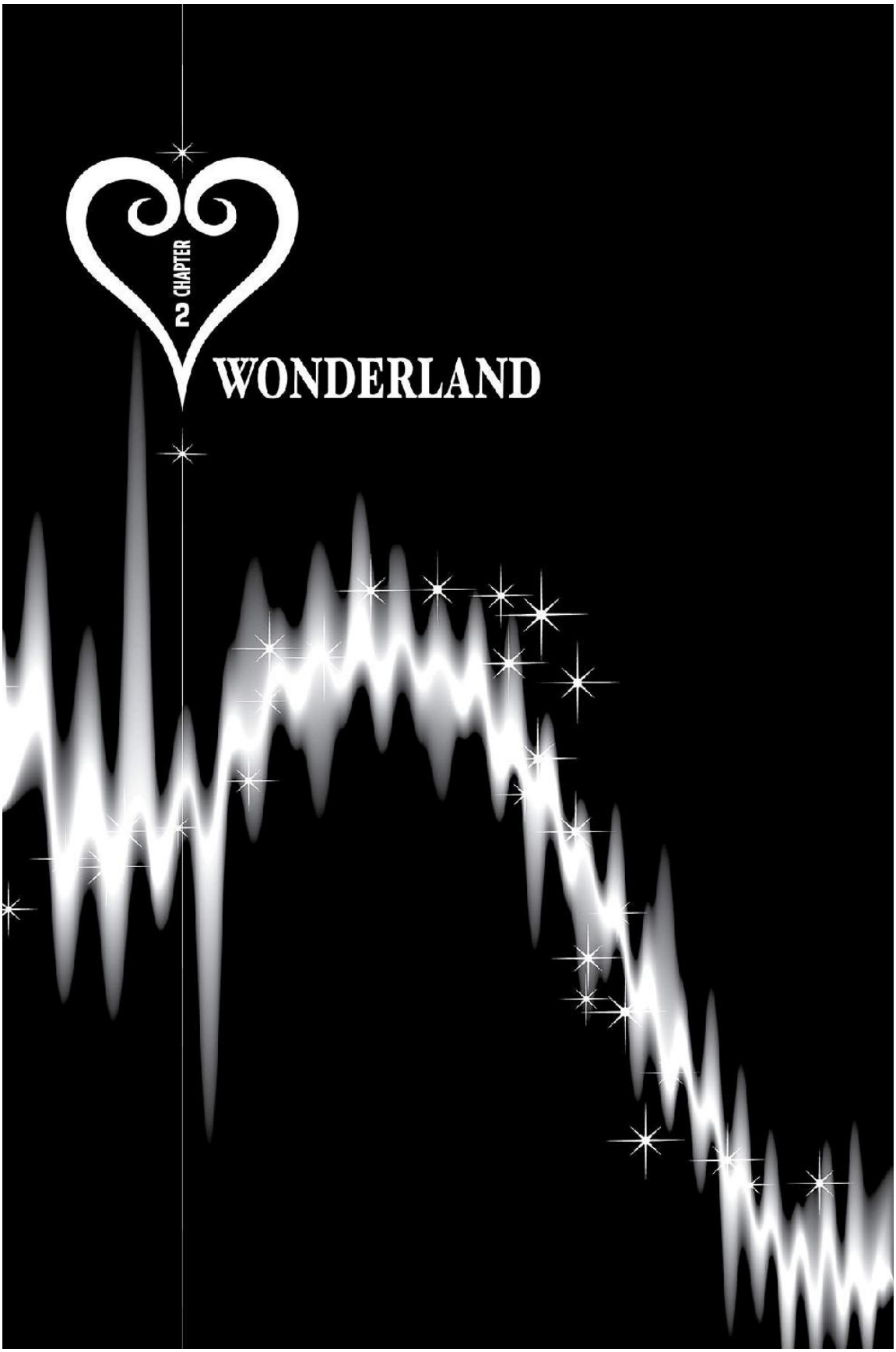
“We were gettin’ worried. You were just standin’ there all by yourself.” Goofy peered into Sora’s face anxiously.

“Illusions…,” Sora murmured.

Heading for the door again, Donald stopped to look at him. “Did ya say something, Sora?”

“Nah, it’s nothing… Let’s go.”

And the trio went through the door that hadn’t been there before, leaving Traverse Town behind.


CHAPTER 2
WONDERLAND

CHAPTER 2

WONDERLAND

The only time anyone looks at me is when I draw pictures.
I want to draw the things I would like to draw.
But the only time anyone looks at me is when I draw what they want me to draw.
Even so…I'll still draw.
I'll put my wishes into it.
If I do, my wishes will come true.
I can hear someone knocking at the door.
Someone…has come to see my drawings.
Who…who are you?
Are you the person in my drawings?
Or are you someone else?

GOOFY CAME THROUGH THE DOOR AHEAD OF SORA. “Gawrsh, did we go backward?” he wondered, looking up at the ceiling. The spacious room they had come into looked very much like the room they had been in before coming to Traverse Town.

“I think it’s a little different, though…,” said Sora.

“Are you sure?” Donald looked all around, taking in the surroundings. It did seem at least like the marble flowers occupied slightly different positions.

“So, did you enjoy meeting the shadows of your memories?”

The voice addressed them suddenly. They turned to see that man in the black cloak standing there.

Sora glared, holding the Keyblade ready. “It was good to see everyone. But what do you really want from me?”

We met illusions of our friends. It wasn’t actually them. And anyway, meeting illusions made out of my memories—it feels like somebody’s messing with my memories.… Sora didn’t like it one bit.

The man stared hard at Sora from beneath his hood. Just then a strange presence came, as if the air trembled.

“Hello!”

A moment ago, no one had been standing beside the cloaked man, but now there was another man. He wore the same sort of hooded cloak, but didn’t hide his face or his bright red hair. His eyes were sharp and fierce, and beneath each eye was a little blue mark, like carnival makeup.

“What do you want?” the hooded man asked, sounding unhappy about it.

“No hogging the hero now,” the red-haired man replied teasingly.

“Are you guys working together?!” Sora demanded, tensing.

But they ignored him, and the hooded man tossed a card to the redhead. “Then, perhaps you’d like to test him.”

“Perhaps I would.” The red-haired man smirked, and the other promptly disappeared into thin air.

“Hey, wait!” Sora ran toward where the hooded man had just been standing. The red-haired man moved right in front of him, practically blocking his way.

“My show now, Keyblade master.” He looked down at Sora, a smile at the corners of his mouth.

“…Who are you?”

“Oh, my name’s Axel. Got it memorized?” As he said his name he straightened, puffing himself up a bit.

“Axel…,” Sora murmured the name to himself, as if that would etch it into

his memory.

This was a different feeling somehow from when he'd first met the hooded man… What could it mean?

"Good, you're a quick learner." Axel grinned and in a vicious motion spread both his arms wide. The next moment he held an eight-pointed weapon in each hand—they were spiked chakrams.

"Wak!" Donald held out his wand.

"So, Sora, now that we're getting to know each other better…don't you go and die on me now!" Axel leaped at them so quickly it seemed he could fly.

"Whoa!" Goofy went sprawling first.

"Why don't I show you how it's done." Axel swung his arms downward and flames rose up from the floor—a wall of fire. "Look out—you'll get roasted!"

The flames chased the trio, cornering them.

"C'mon! Here goes!"

"Huh? *Wa-waaak!*"

"Aaahoooey!"

Sora took Donald and Goofy by the hand and ran straight at the flames. They rolled on the floor and made it through.

"Oh, not bad!" Axel smirked, and Sora rushed in, bringing the Keyblade down on him. Metal struck metal with a terrific clang as Axel blocked the Keyblade with his starlike blades.

"Donald!" Sora called.

"B-*Blizzard!*" Donald cast the spell, realizing that ice would put out fire. A little chunk of ice hit Axel in the face.

"Okay, my turn…!" Goofy held his shield out in front and ran for Axel—but Axel disappeared before his eyes. *"Hyuck?"*

"He disappeared?!" Sora glanced around, but Axel was nowhere to be seen. "Where'd he go?!"

Beside him suddenly, he heard a rushing sound. "Whoa!"

He caught something in his hand—three cards.

"Sora!" Donald and Goofy ran over to him.

"More cards?" said Donald.

Sora flipped them over. Like the one that had opened the door to Traverse Town, each card had a picture.

"Uh… Hey, this was Alice's world, right?" The card Goofy looked at showed a heart pattern and the garden of the Queen of Hearts.

"And these ones are Monstro and Agrabah…" Of the other two cards, one

showed a giant whale and the other a palace in the desert.

"Hmm…" Jiminy Cricket hopped out of Sora's pocket and nodded. "They look like the card you use when you made Traverse Town."

"So, we're supposed to use these and keep going…," said Sora.

"That's right," Axel's voice rang out to answer him.

They turned, and Axel was standing at the top of the stairs.

"Axel?!"

"Did you really think I'd give up oh so easily after an introduction like that?" he said mockingly.

"You were testing us, huh?" Sora brandished the Keyblade at him again.

"And you passed. Congratulations! You're ready now—ready to take on Castle Oblivion." Axel kept on looking down at them from atop the stairs. "You will need to follow your memories. Trust what you remember and seek what you forget. Then, you'll find someone very special."

Someone special…?

Goofy spoke up before Sora could. "You mean King Mickey and Riku?"

“Heh… You’ll just have to give some more thought to who it is that’s…most important to you.”

Most important…, Sora thought. *Who’s the most important to me…?*

“Our most precious memories lie so deep within our hearts that they’re out of reach,” said Axel. “But I’m sure that you can find yours, Sora.”

“Why me?”

Memories lying deep within my heart… Have I forgotten something important?

“You’ve lost sight of the light within the darkness. And it seems that you’ve forgotten that you forgot.”

“The light within the darkness…”

That was a phrase Sora knew. He’d heard it somewhere before… *Right.*

“No matter how deep the darkness, there will always be a light shining within…”

Kairi was the one who told me that. So what is the light for me…? When I turned into a Heartless, the light I saw… That light was…

“You want me to give you a hint?”

At Axel’s offer, Sora came back to the present and glared at him again.

“Sora… Do ya need it?” said Goofy.

“I’m gonna figure it out for myself!” Sora angrily gripped the Keyblade.

Axel laughed. “Good answer. Just what I’d expect from the Keyblade master. But be forewarned… When your sleeping memories awaken, you may no longer be who you are now.”

I’ll…become something I’m not?

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Sora demanded, but Axel had already vanished.

Goofy lowered his shield, looking at Sora. “He disappeared…”

Sora kept staring at the top of the stairs where Axel had been standing, trying to mull it over. “Sleeping memories…”

Donald lowered his wand, too, and looked up at Sora. “Have you got any sleeping memories, Sora?”

“I don’t know… But, I mean, do you remember everything that happened since you were born?”

“’Course not!” Donald folded his arms. “Nobody remembers the things that happened when they were really little.”

“Yeah…” Sora stared down at the Keyblade in his hand.

He could hardly remember anything about when he was small. Was that what

“sleeping memories” meant? Or was it…

Donald and Sora were both lost in thought.

“But you don’t forget important things!” Goofy said cheerfully.

Jiminy Cricket, poking his head out from Sora’s pocket, looked pensive, too. “What Axel said worries me, though. ‘You may no longer be who you are…’ What could he have meant by that?”

“I may no longer be me?” Sora laughed a little, sounding stronger now. “How can I be anyone else?”

“Of course! Still, you can’t be too careful.” Jiminy ducked back into his pocket.

As long as they didn’t quite understand what Axel had meant, it did make sense to be cautious, as Jiminy said.

“I think so, too,” said Goofy. “Feels like just about anything could happen here in Castle Obil…Obliv…Oblivil…”

“Castle Oblivion!” Donald finished.

“Oh yeah! Now I remember!”

“We’ll be okay. Whatever it is they’re cooking up, we’ll be able to handle it together!” said Sora and looked again at where Axel had been standing.

As long as the three of them were together, they’d be all right. They’d made it this far.

“Let’s go!” Sora started toward the next door.

“Right! Didn’t we explore another creepy castle together?” Goofy added, like he’d just remembered. “The one with all those weird contraptions.”

“Hmm…when was that?” said Sora. They’d been to lots of places on their journey, but was there a creepy castle?

“What was it called?” Donald stopped in his tracks. He couldn’t recall, either.

“Gawrsh… Oh, it was… Holler… Holly…” Goofy tried with all his might to remember.

Sora frowned. He must have heard it before somewhere…or had he? Holly… Hollow…

“Sorry. I can’t remember,” Goofy said, sounding disheartened.

Donald jumped and snapped, “Well, quit goofing around!”

“Goofy, are you sure you didn’t make it up?” Sora said doubtfully, facing the door again.

“Gee, I don’t think so…” Goofy tilted his head as if something didn’t make sense.

“Anyway…which card should I use?” Sora held out the three cards for

Donald and Goofy to see.

None of the cards had a creepy castle on them like the one Goofy described. Maybe he'd been mistaken, after all.

"Why don't we go in the same order we went before?" said Donald.

"Then…" Sora stared at the cards. The world they'd gone to first after Traverse Town was Alice's world. "It's this one."

In front of the door, he held up the card with the picture of the hearts and the green gardens. The door began to glow in response and they walked through it.

A forest full of giant lily pads spread out before them.

"*Quack!* This is…"

"Uh, that place where the flowers can talk, isn't it?"

Donald and Goofy looked at each other. The forest was thick with lily pads and flowers. They had definitely been here before. And just then, they could see someone running full speed toward them.

"Hey… Somebody's comin'." Goofy squinted.

The sweating figure held a pocket watch in its hand. It was a white rabbit, with little spectacles on its nose. "I'm late! I'm late! I'm dreadfully, awfully late!"

"Hey!" Goofy exclaimed.

"We met him before, right?" said Sora.

Goofy nodded. They had, here in Alice's world… But what was this white rabbit doing?

"The queen will roast me for dinner!" cried the rabbit. "If I'm late for the trial, it'll be off with *my* head next!"

"What do you mean, off with your head?!" said Sora, but the rabbit didn't seem to hear at all and kept on running.

"Oh, my fur and whiskers! I'll never make it!" With that the rabbit disappeared into the foliage. The trio stared after him, then turned to one another.

"Didn't something like that happen before, too…?" Sora cocked his head. They had followed a rabbit, he was sure of it…and then what? "Hmm. I feel like we saw that rabbit, but…"

"*Wak!* We're sure to find out if we follow him!" said Donald, waving his wand.

"Off with his head, he said!"

"For such a peaceful-lookin' place, it sounds pretty dangerous," Goofy said nervously.

“It doesn’t look that peaceful, either!” Donald retorted.

“Huh?” Sora and Goofy turned.

Donald stood with his arms folded, looking at the Heartless blocking his way.

“Ack!” Sora jumped.

“Fire!” Donald waved his wand, and Sora and Goofy, taking the cue, jumped at the Heartless.

Through the lotus forest, there was a well-kept garden. They walked under a heart-shaped gate of green hedges.

And through the gate, there was quite a commotion.

“I wonder what everyone’s doing here,” said Sora.

They peeped cautiously out from the shadow of the gate.

“Gawrsh, maybe it’s that trial the white rabbit was talking about.”

Just as Goofy spoke, a woman’s booming voice rang through the garden. “Alice! You do understand the charges, don’t you?!”

From up on a dais, a rotund lady—the Queen of Hearts—shouted at Alice, a blonde girl on a wooden stand. The white rabbit was beside the queen, and playing-card soldiers surrounded them.

“There’s Alice!” Donald hissed.

“Of course I don’t understand!” said Alice, staring back at the Queen of Hearts. “I’ve done nothing wrong!”

“Feigning ignorance, dear?” The Queen of Hearts waved her heart-shaped fan. “You are charged with aiding the creatures called Heartless who threaten my domain!”

So the Heartless were causing trouble in this world, too.

“Fiddlesticks! Where is the evidence?” Alice demanded.

“The evidence is…” The Queen of Hearts fell silent a moment, as if she was trying to come up with evidence on the spot. Then she spat, “The evidence is I forgot! That’s the evidence! Because you, Alice, are the one who stole my memory!”

“That’s crazy! How can the fact that she forgot the evidence be evidence?!” Donald stomped his feet.

“We can’t rid the kingdom of Heartless until we get Her Majesty’s memory back,” the white rabbit added. “This is a serious crime!”

“That’s completely unfair!” Alice cried. “So what if you’re a queen! I won’t be to blame just because you can’t remember things!”

“Such insolence! You’re speaking to the Queen of Hearts!” the queen

bellowed. “And to think, I might have let you go, if you had just returned what you stole and apologized straightaway! What a brazen thief!”

“Who’s the brazen one?” Sora blurted, and glared at her.

“The court has reached a verdict!” the Queen of Hearts declared. “Off with her head!”

Off with her head, just because the queen couldn’t remember…?! Sora dashed out of the shadows to stand in the middle of the court, glaring up at the tyrannical queen. “Hold it! This trial is a farce! You have to investigate, not just arrest innocent people!”

She stared round-eyed at Sora’s sudden appearance and her mouth opened wide to shout. “What is the meaning of this? How dare you suggest Alice didn’t steal my memory! I suppose you know who the real culprit is, then!”

“Huh? I, uh…,” Sora faltered. Behind him, Donald and Goofy exchanged nervous glances.

“Speak! Or it’s off with all of your heads! Now, out with it! Who’s the thief?!”

“Um, uh…” What could he say that would help Alice? Sora’s mind raced. “…I’m the thief!”

The Queen of Hearts and Goofy both jumped up in surprise.

“Say that again?”

“Gawrsh, really?!”

“Of course not!” Sora whispered. “But what else am I supposed to say?”

Then he turned back and winked at the defendant. “Run for it, Alice!”

The Queen of Hearts shouted over him. “Cards! Seize them all!”

A squad of heart playing-card soldiers rushed at the trio.

“*Wak!* This is all because you’ve got to go and say something screwy!” Donald complained, blocking a playing-card soldier’s spear with his wand.

“It was the only thing I could think of!” Sora swung the Keyblade at a spade soldier. Goofy seemed to be fighting with all his might, too.

“Well, you shouldn’t tell lies!”

“If I didn’t lie about it, Alice would’ve lost her head!”

Sora and Donald were shouting at each other as they attacked the playing-card soldiers.

“C’mon, you guys! This is no time to be fighting!” Goofy called, trying to mediate.

“Okay, okay!” Donald and Sora both spoke at once and looked at each other, readying wand and Keyblade.

“Yaaaaargh!”

“Fire! Fire!”

The heart soldiers all fell to the ground.

“Whew…”

Donald and Sora caught their breath as Goofy glanced from side to side.

“Huh? Where’s Alice?” said Donald.

“Looks like she escaped…” Sora breathed a sigh of relief. But—

“Perhaps she did,” the Queen of Hearts shouted. “But *you* won’t!”

Donald jumped back. “I think we’ve been trumped!”

At the queen’s command, more playing-card soldiers began to chase them.

“Run!” The trio fled through the heart-shaped hedge gate and ducked into the lotus forest.

In that strange forest, there were plenty of places to hide.

“Are they gone?”

“Yep, all gone,” Donald replied, staring out at the forest from the shadows of the foliage. Sora jumped back down from a lily pad, still looking around nervously.

“This kinda thing happened before, didn’t it,” Goofy remarked.

Sora tilted his head, thinking. “It did?”

“…Uh, I think so… Or am I makin’ it up?”

“We didn’t have to hide before!” said Donald.

Goofy folded his arms. “Oh. Hmm…”

“Anyway, we’ve gotta find Alice!” Sora went farther into the forest.

“Yeah, after all…didn’t she help us in that castle?”

“What castle?” Sora asked.

“Uhh… Y’know, the princesses…”

“Alice isn’t a princess,” said Donald. She was a normal girl, not royalty.

“Yeah, but…it was kinda different… Hmm…” Goofy wasn’t sure how to explain it. “Jasmine was there and Belle…”

“We won’t forget Jasmine or Belle or Alice, either!” Sora replied, as if Goofy were only stating the obvious.

“…There were some other princesses, too, weren’t there?” Now Donald frowned, too.

“Cinderella and Snow White and Aurora, right?” said Sora.

Donald nodded. “Yeah!”

“And along with Kairi, there were seven princesses… Huh? Wait, Alice was

a princess, too?" Sora got confused at what he was saying.

"And the castle—there was a castle…"

"We didn't go to any castles."

"Oh. Gawrsh, maybe I did make it up…?" Goofy seemed to be getting more and more uncertain now that Sora was denying the existence of the castle.

"Never mind that. We have to find Alice before the Heartless get her! C'mon!" Sora took off running.

Goofy was still lost in thought. Donald grabbed him by the arm and they followed Sora.

"Alice!"

She was hiding deep in the lotus forest.

"Things got a little crazy back there," said Sora. "But at least you're okay."

Alice looked at him uneasily. "I don't mean to be ungrateful, but…was that true, what you said? *Are* you the thief?"

"'Course not! Why would I steal the queen's memory?"

It was only a lie he'd told on the spur of the moment.

Goofy nodded. "Yep, Sora only said that 'cos he wanted to save—"

"—to show off!" Donald interrupted.

"I was *not* trying to show off!" Sora shot back.

Alice giggled. "Is that right? Well, you saved me all the same. Thank you, Sora."

"…You know my name, huh, Alice?" Sora looked a little bit confused.

"Oh… Why, so I do! Even though we've never met."

"Yeah…"

So Alice wasn't the real Alice, either…

"Okay, so what's my name?" Donald asked her.

"Er… Is it Donald?"

"Bingo!" He jumped up happily.

"How very strange… And you're Goofy, aren't you?"

"Right! *Ahyuck!*" Goofy laughed. "And we know you're Alice, too!"

"Perhaps it's because this is such a mysterious place…?" Alice wondered.

"Yeah…maybe that's it," said Sora.

And just then, a cat appeared in the midst of the lotus forest.

"Feeling better after that mad dash, are we?"

"It's the Cheshire Cat!" They looked up at the cat floating above a lily pad. Before, too, the Cheshire Cat had sent them running in circles with his riddles.

Before…? Sora thought. *When was it?*

“What’s the matter, Sora?” asked Goofy, peering anxiously at him.

“Oh—nothing.”

The Cheshire Cat chuckled. “It seems you’re having quite a time—or are you out of time? After all, you’re not out of the woods yet. The Queen of Hearts is a stickler for justice! She won’t forget you till she remembers, and she won’t stop hounding you till you get her memory back!”

The Queen of Hearts certainly did seem stubborn. But how could they get someone else’s memory back? It was hard enough to remember things you forgot yourself… Like the things that happened when you were very young.

“Did she forget because she remembers? Does she remember that she forgot?” the cat mused. “Not that it matters much.”

“I don’t know… I think we oughta just stay away from her,” Sora said, deep in thought. Jiminy Cricket hopped out of his pocket.

“But, Sora, what about Alice? If the queen catches her again, it’s off with… Well, you know!”

Of course, Jiminy was right. If they left now, the queen would just be chasing Alice around some more. Alice would end up on trial again, and the queen would yell, “Off with her head!”

“Then, I guess we’d better do something about the queen,” Sora sighed.

“You should do something. But you don’t have to do anything.” The Cheshire Cat’s head floated away from his body.

“Huh?”

The cat wasn’t making much sense.

“If you can’t remember something, it’s like it never happened,” said the cat. “Likewise, if something never happened, you can’t remember it. Try too hard to remember, and your memory might lie to you.”

“Lie…?”

“Try too hard to remember, and your memory might lie…” But how could memories be lies?

Maybe…if a person couldn’t remember something and somebody lied to them about it, then they might believe that was true.

Like that time.

When Sora had turned into a Heartless…he couldn’t remember it very well. All he really knew was that Kairi had saved him.

But…he only believed that because when he got his body back, Kairi had been holding him. What if it had really been someone else who saved him?

“That’s all I can say,” the Cheshire Cat told them. “The rest is for you to figure out.”

With that, the cat floated up and up and disappeared.

“He says such funny things, just like always,” said Goofy, staring up after him.

Alice was looking the same way. “…I think it made a little bit of sense, though.”

“What do you mean?” said Sora.

“Well, we won’t know until we try.” Alice smiled at him. “At any rate, we ought to find out who actually stole the queen’s memory.”

The trio nodded, and they headed farther into the lotus forest.

“Can you climb?” asked Sora.

“I’ll be all right,” said Alice.

Sora and Donald lifted Alice up onto a lily pad, and they climbed higher and higher.

“My goodness, we’re high up.”

“The Heartless won’t come up here, though,” said Goofy, taking Alice’s hand.

“Heartless… There were so many of them, even in the forest.”

“You didn’t get hurt, did ya?”

“They didn’t seem to be interested in coming after me. Oh—there! Over that way is a sort of passageway.” Alice pointed to a large clump of bushes hiding a hole just big enough to crawl through.

They went through the hole—or fell through it—and on the other side was a perfectly normal-looking room with a heating stove.

“Gawrsh, what a sudden change of scenery!” Goofy sat on the sofa. “Did we come here before, too?”

“Yeah, we did.” Sora nodded and looked around the room. There had been a talking doorknob and potions to drink that made them bigger or smaller…and they had been in the room upside down, too.

And they had fought a big Heartless here… What sort of Heartless was it?

“Is there anything in here?” Donald paced around. Suddenly the door at the back of the room opened with a bang.

“There you are! Thought you’d seen the last of me, did you?”

It was the Queen of Hearts, surrounded by playing-card soldiers.

“Uh-oh!”

“The game is up, scoundrels! For stealing my memory, I sentence you to… to…”

A weird flash of light interrupted the queen.

“What was that?!” cried Sora.

“I sentence…you…sentence…?” After that light, there seemed to be something wrong with the queen.

“Gawrsh, what’s wrong with her?” Goofy stared with his head cocked.

“Oh? What’s going on? Where am I?” the queen mumbled.

“Huh?” Donald stared, too. She was always giving orders with such ferocity —now there was definitely something off.

“What in the world am I doing?” The queen waved her fan about. “Confound it, I can’t remember!”

“What could’ve happened to her?” Sora whispered.

“Maybe someone swiped her memory again?” Goofy replied.

The weird light filled the room again.

“Look out! Something’s coming!” Alice cried, and just as she did, a huge Heartless fell from the ceiling. It had long arms and a flat face that seemed to be made up of heads stacked on top of each other—the Trickmaster.

“This is what stole the queen’s memory?!” Sora stood ready with the Keyblade.

“H-*heeeelp*!” The queen and the playing-card soldiers ran around in a panic.

“Goofy, take care of Alice!” called Sora. He remembered—with this Heartless, they had to attack its body or its head. “Donald, you hit it with magic and get it to stop moving!”

“Got it! *Blizzard!*” Donald’s magic exploded at the Trickmaster’s feet.

Goofy took Alice’s hand in the meantime and hid with her behind the sofa.

Sora leaped up high and dealt the Trickmaster’s body a heavy blow. It started to fling its arms around, knocking Sora and Donald back.

“Wh-whoooa!”

“Wa-wawaaaak!”

“Are you fellas all right?!” Goofy gave them healing potions. “You’ve gotta jump to dodge it!”

“Was that how we did it?” Sora got up and readied the Keyblade again, and this time jumped over the Trickmaster’s flailing arms.

Then Sora jumped up onto the table and brought the Keyblade down hard on its head. He felt the impact in his arms.

The Trickmaster was engulfed in light, and it disappeared.

“You did it!” Alice jumped out from behind the sofa and threw her arms around Sora.

“You, there! All of you!” the queen bellowed, quashing their celebration. “What is the meaning of this? Where did that creature come from?!”

“Well, gee, that’s a good question…” Sora scratched his head. Where *did* Heartless come from? Heartless were Heartless. But they still didn’t quite understand what the Heartless really were.

“So, you refuse to answer? Hiding something, are you?” The Queen of Hearts pointed her fan at them. “They’re plotting against us! Seize them!”

But Alice stepped forward. “Please, Your Majesty, wait! It was you who

commanded us to destroy that creature."

"Huh?" Sora stared at her.

"Your Majesty, in her prudence, didn't completely trust us at first. And so, at Your Majesty's command, we fought that thing to prove ourselves. Isn't that right, Sora?" Alice turned just enough to give Sora a wink.

"We did? I mean—we did! Uh, Your Majesty!" Realizing Alice's trick, Sora couldn't help but grin.

"I…told you…to do that?" the queen fumbled.

"But, Your Majesty, don't you remember?" said Alice with a polite smile.

"Don't be ridiculous! I never forget anything! Of course I gave the command. You did splendidly." The Queen of Hearts set her jaw as she deigned to praise them. "That's enough of this place, then!"

She turned and swept out, the playing-card soldiers marching behind her.

"Oh, dear… That was close." Alice turned back to the trio, delicately wiping her brow.

"Way to improvise! I never would have thought of that," said Sora. He hadn't imagined that Alice would be the one to save them with a trick.

"But the Cheshire Cat said as much, after all. 'Try too hard to remember, and your memory might lie to you.' The Queen of Hearts would never admit that she forgot. So instead, she remembered something—something that didn't happen at all! She ended up fooling herself."

"Something that didn't happen…" A troubled look came over Sora's face.

The world they were in was created out of Sora's memories. But he didn't remember everything that had happened in perfect detail. What if…what if he couldn't trust his memories?

"What is it, Sora?" said Alice, worried for him.

"Nothing. Well, I guess you'll be safe now."

"And the queen won't give us any more trouble," Goofy added proudly. "After all, we got rid of the Heartless, just like she commanded!"

"Don't tell me you've been fooled, too!" Donald scolded.

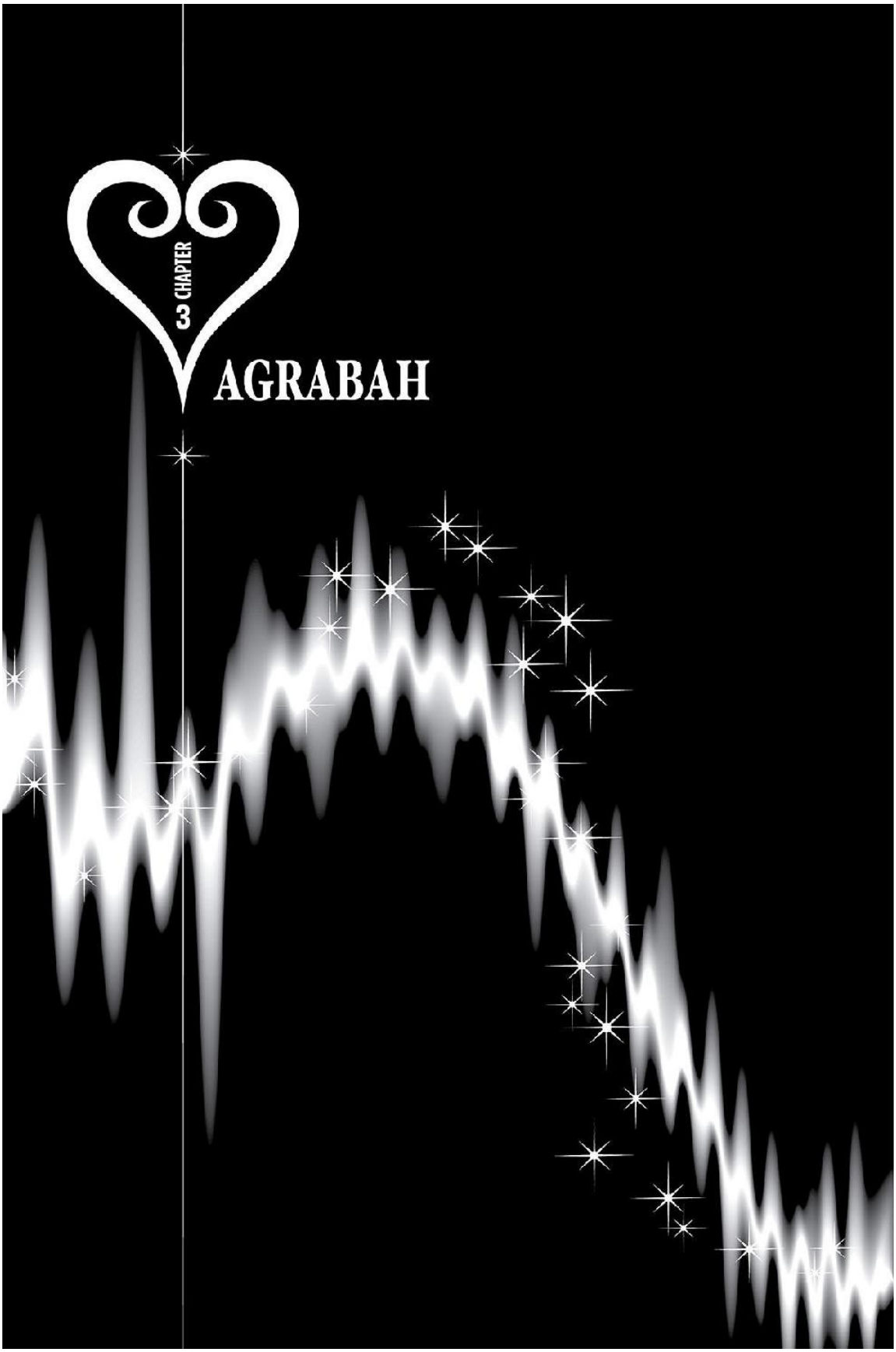
"Huh? But she did command… Huh? Gawrsh, didn't she?" Goofy folded his arms, thinking hard.

Alice began to laugh—and then Sora caught it, and Donald and Goofy joined in.

"But you have to go, don't you?" said Alice.

"Yeah…" Sora turned, and there was only a normal door where the talking doorknob had been.

“Thank you so very much,” Alice said sincerely and curtsied to them.
“Just like a princess!” Donald exclaimed.
Alice laughed quietly.
“You *are* a princess!” Goofy crowed.
“A princess? Whatever do you mean?” Alice tilted her head.
“Aw, it’s nothing!” said Sora. “C’mon, Donald, Goofy, let’s go.”
“Do be careful, Sora!”
And the trio walked through the door.


CHAPTER 3
AGRABAH

CHAPTER 3

AGRABAH

Can we meet soon…?
No, we will meet soon.
It's in the pictures I drew. My drawings of the future.
So you and I will cross paths very soon.
What kind of smile does the real you have?
What will the real you think when you see me, I wonder?
The fake me and the real me.
The fake world and the real world.
False feelings and true feelings.
But as for what is real and what is not, I don't know anymore, either.
We will meet soon.
That's the only truth I have—an illusion.

I hope we see each other soon… I want to meet you, Sora.

THE TRIO STEPPED OUT AGAIN INTO THE SOARING HALL. At the end, there was another flight of steps leading higher into the castle. The gleaming marble walls began to feel eerie.

"Donald, Goofy, let's go!"

Sora had to keep going. He had to find out if that hunch he'd felt when they first entered the castle was right. The feeling that he'd meet someone important here.

Behind him, Goofy paused. "Hmm…"

"What's the matter?" Donald looked up at him.

"It's that castle I was talking about earlier… I just know I didn't imagine it."

Sora turned back to see Goofy looking quite serious. "But…we don't remember going to another castle."

"We did, too—that was the castle where Sora had to use the Keyblade to free Kairi's heart…," said Goofy. "Then he disappeared! And I was so worried. How could I ever forget that?"

"Oh! When I turned into a Heartless!" Sora remembered. There was no way he'd forget that, either.

In that pitch-black darkness…I heard Kairi's voice…

"Wait. That happened…in a castle?"

"Aww, you forgot that?" said Donald.

"Umm…" Sora cocked his head.

"'Cos I remember perfectly!" Donald puffed his chest out.

"Then what was it called?" asked Sora.

"That's easy! It was…" Then, Donald trailed off, his head tilted in concentration. "Huh."

Sora couldn't quite remember the place where those things had happened. *That was… It was… Where?*

"Hey, Jiminy… It's gotta be in your journal, right?" said Sora, and the cricket hopped out of his pocket.

"Every word!" Jiminy took a tiny notebook from his coat pocket. "I finished the first volume right before we got to this castle."

He opened the well-used notebook—and shouted in dismay. "Oh! How could that be?!"

"Gawrsh, what's wrong?" Goofy leaned down, trying to see the tiny journal.

"It's completely blank!"

Donald looked closer, too, and jumped up. "*Wak!* The journal entries are all gone!"

“How could this have happened?! I’m so careful with the journals! Ohh…all that hard work is gone…” His knees wobbling in shock, Jiminy sat weakly on the floor.

“Let me see it…” Sora took the little notebook and skimmed through it. Every page was blank, as if not a single word had even been written there.

“Journal pages don’t just vanish!” said Donald, frowning.

“Maybe it’s more than that.” Sora handed the notebook back to Jiminy and spoke with more certainty. “Goofy was telling us about another castle we’d been to… But none of us really remember it.”

Yeah. He didn’t make it up—it’s not just his imagination, Sora thought. *Little by little, we’re forgetting pieces of the past.*

“Hold on!” Jiminy shouted, jumping to his feet. “Remember what that mystery fella said? ‘In this place, to find is to lose and to lose is to find.’ It must’ve been our memories he was talking about losing!”

“So if we keep going, we’ll lose more… Guess that’s why they called it Castle Oblivion.” Sora folded his arms, thinking hard.

The farther they went, the more memories they would lose—he’d never imagined something that crazy. But this was real, and they were watching their own memories turn vague and fragmented—and fade out, bit by bit. If they kept going, how much more would they forget…?

“Should we go back?” said Donald.

“Don’t worry!” Goofy replied, looking untroubled. “We might forget about places we’ve been or things we’ve seen, but we won’t forget who our friends are.”

“You really think so…?” said Sora.

Goofy smiled at him. “C’mon, Sora, when you turned into a Heartless, did you forget about me and Donald?”

“Of course I didn’t!”

“There ya go!” Satisfied, Goofy posed with his head high. “See, no matter what happens, you won’t forget us!”

“Huh… You’re right. Thanks, Goofy.”

No matter what…I won’t forget my friends. There’s no way I can forget about all the people I got to meet.

“Then we’ve got nothing to be scared of!” Donald held up his wand in determination.

“But when I turned into a Heartless, who was the one who took forever to notice and kept clobbering me?” Sora teased.

“How come you didn’t forget about *that*?!” Donald flailed with his wand, jumping up and down. “Meanie!”

Sora and Goofy and Jiminy Cricket, too, looked at one another and burst out laughing.

“Well, I’ll be extra sure to write everything down from now on,” said Jiminy.

“Thanks, Jiminy,” said Sora. “We’re counting on you.”

Jiminy nodded and went back into Sora’s pocket.

“I know!” Goofy told Donald and Sora. “How about we make sure we remember why we’re on our journey?”

“Goofy and I are on a quest to…,” Donald began.

“To find King Mickey,” Goofy finished, “’cos he stayed on the other side of the Door of Darkness to help save everything. I think.”

Donald and Goofy nodded at each other.

“And I’m looking for Riku. He was with the king when the door closed,” said Sora. “Yeah, you’re right. There’s no way we’ll forget the important things.”

That was why they were going through this castle—to find Riku and King Mickey, who had pulled that door shut from the other side. They wouldn’t lose sight of that.

“But…I wonder what we’ve forgotten?” Donald said, sounding regretful.

“I can’t think of anything, so maybe that means I really am losing my memories,” said Goofy. “But whatever they were, they couldn’t have been very important memories, right?”

“Yeah. If it was really important, you wouldn’t have forgotten it,” Sora agreed and held out something. “Look.”

It was the star-shaped charm made of thalassa shells.

“I’m making them so even if one of us gets lost, we’ll make it back here safe and sound. So the three of us will always be together.”

Donald peered at the charm sitting in the palm of Sora’s hand. “What is it?”

“A good luck charm Kairi gave me. It’s special to her, so I promised that I would return it.”

I promised her that I’d come back, Sora told himself. *I’ll find Riku and we’ll go back to Kairi together.*

“I’ll never forget making that promise,” he said. “So I’ll never forget Kairi.”

“It’s my lucky charm. So you have *to bring it back to me!”*

“Don’t worry. I will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

The promise he'd made to Kairi in that cavern. Her dark eyes and red hair, her small hands. The pendant she wore and the sound of her voice. He could never, ever forget…

"Sora!"

It felt like he heard Kairi's voice from somewhere. Sora turned—but the girl he saw standing there had flaxen hair and a white dress.

"Huh?!"

"Sora…" She smiled at him.

But he had never seen her before. Who was this girl…?

"Hey, Sora, what's the matter?"

At Donald's question, Sora blinked, and the girl in the white dress was gone.

"Huh… Do I know…that girl?"

"Where'd you go?" said Donald, looking up at Sora with concern.

"Sorry. Never mind… C'mon, let's keep going." Sora gave them a smile and ran up the stairs.

The room had walls of white marble, the same as the castle halls. There was something drawn on the floor, like a magic square, and in the center sat a big crystal ball.

The crystal ball showed an image of Sora and his friends, and Axel was staring at it hard.

Across from him, a woman in the same black cloak also peered into the crystal ball.

"You seem pretty intrigued by this Sora kid," she said without looking up.

Axel turned away. "Are you telling me you're not, Larxene?"

She covered her hand with her mouth and giggled. "Haven't decided yet."

Larxene wore her straight blond hair smoothly slicked back, which along with her sharp gaze created an altogether severe impression.

"I think what intrigues me more is what you see in him," she crooned.

"Once, for a time, he became a Heartless," said Axel.

"Oh yes—that's how he came to this castle." Larxene folded her arms and took a step toward Axel.

"And do you know what happens to people who turn into Heartless?"

"They lose their minds and their feelings—they're consumed by the darkness. Of *course* I know that."

Axel turned to look at the crystal ball again, at the shape of Sora and his

companions glowing inside it. “But not him. Sora held on to his feelings, even as a Heartless. There’s only one other person who’s been able to do that.”

Just one other person… The only one that we know of.

“It’s not just that,” he went on. “Why isn’t he alone? It’s a world made from *his* memories—so why are the king’s minions still with him?”

“Are you saying those two have some kind of power…some strength in their hearts, too?”

“I don’t know.”

Was it because of Sora’s power or the Keyblade? Or was it really something about those two lackeys themselves…?

“So that’s what interests you?” said Larxene. “Why the Keyblade chose Sora’s heart…and why those others are still with him.”

“What is it that makes his heart shine like that? And what’s sleeping within it?”

“The mysteries of the heart, huh…?” Larxene, too, looked again at the images in the crystal ball.

“Isn’t it the organization’s mission to unlock them?” Axel placed his hand on the crystal ball and gazed closely at the image of Sora.

When Sora held up a card and opened the door, hot air gusted out into their faces.

The trio stepped through the door and looked around. On the dry ground sat buildings made of stone, their roofs painted in vivid colors. Clouds of dust stirred as they walked.

“Where are we this time?” said Donald.

“Uh, gee… It’s Aladdin’s world, isn’t it?” Goofy sounded uncertain about it.

“I remember, all right.” Sora looked down. It was hard to believe that even the hot desert air could be an illusion made from his memories.

But…I didn’t even remember who we met in this world, until Donald and Goofy said so, Sora thought. *I forgot…*

Aladdin’s world… And who else was here?

Walking ahead, Donald stopped short and jumped. “*Wak!* Someone’s in trouble!”

Sora followed Donald’s line of sight—someone was there surrounded by Heartless.

“It’s Aladdin!” Goofy exclaimed and dashed toward the commotion.

“We’d better do something! *Blizzard!*” Donald pelted out spells as he ran.

Sora followed and brought the Keyblade down on the Heartless. “Need some help?!”

“Thanks! I thought I was done for!” Aladdin shouted back.

The Heartless rushed at the newcomers with mean-looking scimitars. As Sora swung the Keyblade with a fierce cry, Aladdin countered with his knife, too. But no matter how many they defeated, more Heartless sprouted up from the dusty ground.

“They just keep coming!” yelled Donald, waving his wand.

“Guess we’d better see if that legend’s true!” Aladdin took a shiny golden oil lamp from his pocket. “Magic lamp, my first wish! Get rid of these Heartless!”

Blue smoke poured out of the lamp and took the shape of a blue-skinned genie. “Stand back, kids! Comin’ through!”

Donald looked up. “It’s the Genie!”

“…Genie?” Sora murmured.

“Something the matter, Sora?” Goofy said, peering at him anxiously.

“Nah, it’s nothing.”

The Genie of the lamp… *A friend who fought beside us here with Aladdin. But Donald remembered his name…and I didn’t.*

“Genie of the lamp here! Nothing I can’t make right as rain!” Floating in the air, the Genie folded his arms and grinned down at them. “Well—if we had rain in the desert. But enough dry jokes! One Heartless disappearing act, coming right up!”

He snapped his fingers, and all at once, the Heartless vanished.

Donald jumped. “Wow!”

Aladdin took a step closer to Sora and held out his hand. “Thanks, Sora.”

“Well, if we were in trouble, you wouldn’t keep walking, either—right, Aladdin?” Sora laughed.

Aladdin’s mouth fell open. “Wait—how do you know my name?”

“You know my name, too!”

“You’re right!” He smiled a bit bashfully and shook hands with Sora.

It’s okay—I still remember, thought Sora. *I won’t forget my friends.*

“You could’ve called the Genie in the first place, though,” he said with a grin.

“It’s not that simple. The thing is…” Aladdin looked up at the Genie.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself! But I will anyway. Can’t have as many wishes as you want, the world just doesn’t work that way! Strictly limited to…”

“Three wishes!” Goofy jumped in. *“Ahyuck!”*

“My, sir, have you shopped with us before?” the Genie remarked. “Precisely!

Three wishes per master! So, Aladdin here has two wishes left—and ixnay on the wishing for more wishes!”

“Two wishes left? Then you’d better use them carefully,” said Sora.

“Yeah… I’ve got to get back to the palace somehow, though.” Aladdin sounded as if he’d arrived at a decision.

“Uh, why do you need to go there, Aladdin?” Goofy wondered.

“It’s that no-good royal vizier, Jafar. He had me get this magic lamp from the Cave of Wonders. And the cave was full of Heartless! I’m lucky I made it back to Agrabah in one piece.”

“He made you go all by yourself?” Sora folded his arms. “This Jafar guy’s got a lot of nerve, giving dangerous orders like that.”

“I know how you feel, master,” said the Genie. “People have been ordering me around for a good ten thousand years!”

“Aw, gee, that doesn’t sound like a good time,” said Donald, and the Genie surprised him with a bear hug. *“Wa-wak!”*

“It’s really, really not. No fun for the Genie at all!”

“Okay, I get it—you can let me go!” Lifted off the ground in the Genie’s arms, Donald wriggled and kicked.

“I keep wishing someone will wish me outta this gig…but go figure the odds on that!” The Genie set down Donald and drifted, hanging his head.

Aladdin looked at him thoughtfully for a moment and said, “Well, how about I use my third wish to set you free?”

The Genie spun around in the air once. “Huh?!”

“I’ve still got two wishes left. So I’ll save my last one to wish for your freedom,” Aladdin explained, smiling brightly.

“Doth my pointy ears deceive me? Master, you’d do that for me? Not just pulling my topknot now, are you?”

“I promise, Genie. I’ll set you free with my third wish!”

The Genie crowed, flying in circles, and this time hugged Aladdin tightly.

“Anyway, there’s only one thing I want,” Aladdin said seriously, while the Genie was still rubbing his cheek against Aladdin’s.

“Piece of cake, when you’ve got the Genie of the lamp on your side!” He let Aladdin go finally, looking down at him from the air. “So, what’ll it be, Al? Fame? Fortune? A herd of luxury camels for your very own?”

“Well, there’s this girl… Her name is Jasmine. She’s the princess of Agrabah.”

“The princess?”

“A Princess of Heart!” Donald and Goofy both echoed at once.

Sora had completely forgotten about the person who was the most important to Aladdin.

Jasmine was a Princess of Heart— Wait, what did that mean?

There are too many things I’m forgetting, Sora thought, *even though Donald and Goofy seem to remember. Why…?*

“Yeah, she’s the princess,” Aladdin sighed. “And…that’s the problem. A street rat like me doesn’t have many chances to see her. That’s how all this started—I thought if I went to the Cave of Wonders, I could get the treasure, and then maybe Jasmine would want to meet me.”

“Sounds like your wish should be that you can see Jasmine any time you want, right?” said Sora.

Aladdin nodded.

“Well, have I got the package for you!” the Genie exclaimed. “Not only will you meet the lady, you’ll go in style—as a prince! How d’you like the sound of that, Al?”

“Me, a prince?! Can you really do that?”

“In an Agrabah minute!” The Genie struck a proud pose.

“Looks like the legends were true after all. C’mon, let’s get to the palace!” Aladdin ran ahead, unable to wait any longer.

They ran up the alleys, taking out Heartless as they went.

“Gawrsh. They just won’t leave us alone!” Goofy yelled with his shield out.

“You could help, y’know!” Donald complained at the Genie, who was floating along with his arms folded, doing nothing at all.

But the Genie shook his head. “Not unless my master wishes for it. And unless he’s really bad with numbers, he won’t use a wish on it now!”

“I know, Genie,” said Aladdin. “So the sooner I can get to the palace and see Jasmine, the sooner I can set you free!”

“I don’t even know what I did to deserve a master like you, Al!”

“Well, we better hurry!”

Just as Sora said that, Goofy jumped up and pointed. “Look!”

In the plaza on the way to the palace, a girl lay unconscious on the ground, surrounded by Heartless.

“Jasmine!” Aladdin cried. As if he’d only spurred them on, the Heartless pressed in on her with their scimitars. “She needs our help!”

But the plaza was wide, and she was still far off. “We’ll never make it in

time!” said Sora, even as he ran with his Keyblade ready.

Behind him, Aladdin looked helplessly up at the Genie. “…I don’t have a choice. Genie! I wish for you to save Jasmine!”

“Can do! *Chaaarge!*” The Genie snapped his fingers and the Heartless surrounding Jasmine all disappeared.

“Jasmine!” Aladdin ran to her, following the others.

“She fainted, but it looks like she’s okay,” said Sora, relieved.

But Aladdin looked miserable. “Now I’ve only got one wish left…,” he murmured, and with that, still more Heartless appeared, seeming like they would deliberately take the last one, too.

“Not again…! Sorry, Genie—you’re the only one who can—”

“Wait! This is your last wish! Don’t waste it!” When Aladdin turned to ask him how, Sora gave him a thumbs-up and a grin.

“This time, we’ll handle the wish granting!” Goofy held his shield up and rushed straight at the Heartless.

“Hey, me, too!” Donald waved his wand. *“Blizzard! Fire!”*

“Leave some for me!” With his knife out, Aladdin followed Sora into the fray.

“See, we managed without the Genie!” said Sora.

“Thanks, Sora. So, now I’ve only got one wish left…” Aladdin hung his head.

A strange cry from some kind of animal rang out. *“Squaaawrk!”*

It was a parrot with bright plumage, and it held something in its claws…

“The lamp—!”

Somehow, while they were busy fighting the Heartless, the parrot must have stolen the magic lamp.

“Give it back!” Aladdin tried to chase the parrot.

“Good work, Iago,” said a smug, grating voice. It belonged to a man in black robes, holding a staff topped with a snake’s head. The parrot dropped the lamp into his waiting hand and settled on his shoulder.

“Jafar!” Aladdin shouted.

That…was Jafar?

A man with a mean, sneering smile—Sora was sure he’d seen him before, but he just wasn’t sure of the name.

I remember coming to this world before, but I’ve forgotten the people I met here and all the things that happened…

“In this place, to find is to lose and to lose is to find.” Well, I’m losing things, so what did I find?

If I’m forgetting so many things, does that mean I’m remembering things, too?

Oh yeah—there was that girl I saw before we came to this world. But who was *she?*

“Sora!”

She called my name. But I can’t remember hers.

Light blond hair and a white dress… Who could she be?

“Gawrsh, I don’t think I like the look of him,” Goofy was whispering to him, bringing him back to the present.

“Hmm… It seems my plans have gone amiss.” Jafar stroked his goatee, staring at Aladdin. “I was certain you’d waste your last wish…what with poor Jasmine in distress and those delightful creatures to deal with. But no matter—the lamp and its genie are mine to command!”

“Why are you doing this, Jafar?!” Aladdin demanded, stalking closer. “You’ve got the lamp! What more do you want?”

Jafar jumped back. “Your lies are transparent, boy. I knew you would use the lamp to try and win Jasmine’s heart. But we can’t have that now, can we? Jasmine, you see, is mine!” he crowed, brandishing his staff. “Certainly you realize that if I marry the princess, nothing can stop me from becoming sultan! You’re nothing more than a pawn in my game, street rat.”

Then Jafar held the lamp high. “Genie! My first wish! Deliver Jasmine to me!”

“I’m sorry, Al…” The Genie snapped his fingers and Jasmine, lying on the ground, floated up into his arms.

“Genie! What are you doing?!” Aladdin cried.

“My hands are tied on this one, Al. I gotta obey whoever has his mitts on the lamp…,” the Genie said miserably, his back turned to Aladdin.

“Precisely. Farewell, Aladdin, you fool!” Jafar departed with a sweep of his robe.

“Oh no… Now I’ve lost Jasmine *and* the lamp.” Aladdin fell to his knees, pounding the dirt with his fists.

“You can feel bad about it some other time!” said Sora. “Come on, Aladdin!”

He didn’t even look up. “But… There’s nothing I can do now.”

“If you don’t pull yourself together, you’ll never see Jasmine again! You lost the lamp, so what? You can save her on your own!” Sora grabbed Aladdin’s

shoulder. “Losing someone you care about is bad, but not as bad as never getting them back!”

It was awful, being unable to see someone you cared about… Sora hated being away from Kairi and Riku.

I’ve already forgotten what happened in that fight to close the Door of Darkness, he thought. *I can’t even remember the names of all the new friends I made on the way. Maybe it doesn’t hurt as much if I forget them.*

But I don’t want to forget, not ever!

“So you can’t give up!” he told Aladdin. Maybe he was telling himself, too.

“Sora… You’re right. I’ll try. I have to save Jasmine!” At last Aladdin got to his feet.

“But Jafar’s got the lamp now, right? We can’t just walk right up and expect to beat him…,” Goofy worried. Sora thought Aladdin didn’t need to hear that.

But Aladdin didn’t flinch. “Maybe we can. I’ve got an idea. Listen up…”

He leaned in and murmured his plan…

Jafar stood in front of the palace. Beside him, still unconscious, Jasmine lay on the ground.

“Jafar!” Sora ran to him, along with Donald and Goofy—but not Aladdin.

“What’s this? Has Aladdin given up on his precious Jasmine already?”

“We’re here to defeat you!” Sora held the Keyblade ready.

“I won’t waste a wish on the likes of you three. I’ll deal with you myself!” Leaving Jasmine behind, Jafar unhurriedly strode toward Sora and made to swing his staff.

In that instant Sora shouted, “Aladdin! Now!”

Aladdin jumped down from the rooftops, where he’d been waiting for Jafar to turn his back on Jasmine.

“What?!” Jafar started as Aladdin scooped up Jasmine in his arms. “You! Genie, seize him!”

“Al, forgive me!” The Genie descended toward Aladdin, his arms outstretched.

Aladdin growled in frustration and let the Genie knock him back but landed on his knees and kept his balance. “You fell for it, Jafar!”

“What exactly?!” Jafar turned to face Aladdin, who wore a self-assured smile.

“*Quack!* You just blew your second wish. Only one left!” Donald pointed his wand at Jafar.

“So go ahead, use it to win Jasmine’s heart, and you’ll still have to deal with us!” Goofy held up his shield, too.

“Oh, now I get it. Pretty clever, Al!” The Genie soared up happily.

“Well, well… The cunning of a rat,” Jafar sneered. “But unfortunately, you can’t see beyond the bait. Your little ploy changes nothing! I can crush you once and for all and make Jasmine my own! Genie, my final wish—transform me into an all-powerful genie!”

Hiding his face in one hand, the Genie unwillingly fired off his magic, and there was a brilliant flash of light. The ground split open.

Jafar leaped into the abyss. Sora and the others followed him. They landed on underground ruins surrounded by bubbling lava.

“Whew, it’s hot…” Sora squinted against the heat.

Jafar cackled madly. “So this is the power of a genie!” Turned entirely crimson in his new form, he swung a fist at Sora.

“Whoa!” Sora fell hard, and then flaming boulders fell on the others like meteors.

“Ow-ow-ow-ow!” Donald ran in circles with his tail on fire.

Sora leaned on the Keyblade to stand and then jumped up high. “Take this!” And he brought the Keyblade down on the genie Jafar, but…“What’s going on?! I can’t hurt him with the Keyblade!”

Jafar’s terrible laughter rang out. “Did you really think you could hurt a genie?!” His hand swiped at Sora again, knocking him back.

“Guh!”

“…Sora!” Donald and Goofy ran to him.

“How do we beat him…?” Sora pounded the ground as Donald started to help him up. They saw Aladdin get thrown to the ground just like Sora.

“Hmm…” Goofy stared at Jafar, frowning in concentration.

“*Wak!* This is no time to just stand around staring!” Donald scolded.

“Uh… But didn’t we have to do somethin’ different?”

“Huh?” said Sora.

“We fought him before, right? And we couldn’t beat him fighting like usual, so… Gawrsh, what was it we did…?” Goofy folded his arms.

“‘We couldn’t beat him fighting like usual’…?” Now Sora was trying to think of it.

“What, did you forget that, too?” Donald fumed.

“Well, do you remember it, Donald?”

“…*Quack?* Umm… We did…something different…?” He couldn’t

remember either, after all.

Aladdin cried out, bowled over by a ball of lava.

“Ha! Just look at these jerks!” Iago flew overhead, still clutching the magic lamp in his claws.

“Aladdin!” Sora ran for him, but Goofy stayed deep in thought. “Hold on!”

“I won’t be able to save Jasmine after all…” Aladdin shook his head miserably.

“C’mon, Aladdin!” Sora pulled him to his feet. “You just have to believe!”

Believe—that means not wavering, not giving up. That’s what all my friends taught me.

But they were in trouble! This wasn’t the time to be reflecting on things like that.

“I believe in you, Aladdin! You and Jasmine!”

Even if I do forget about people, Sora realized, *the things I learned from them will always be with me in my heart.*

And that’s why we’ll win.

“I know, Sora… I won’t give up.”

Just as they stood up straight to face the fight again, Goofy shouted, “I remember now! We’ve gotta take the lamp from Jafar!”

“What’s that gonna do?” Donald retorted.

“Sora can trap Jafar with the lamp’s power!”

“Which means… We have to get that parrot?” said Sora.

“Right!” Goofy nodded.

“…Ohh. Okay, got it!” Sora sprang up high at Iago, swinging the Keyblade at his claws.

“Sora?!” Aladdin yelled as Sora hurtled toward the lamp, which fell from Iago’s grasp.

“I wish for Jafar to be trapped inside the lamp—like a genie!”

Sora shouted his wish and the lamp shone with a dazzling light…and Jafar was pulled inside.

“What’s happening? How can this be?! I am all-powerful—!” His cry of rage was sucked into the lamp along with him.

The boiling lava hissed and cooled, and the underground ruins were quiet.

“We did it!” Donald jumped for joy and ran to Aladdin. Sora and Goofy followed him.

“Looks like everything turned out okay, Aladdin!” said Goofy, but Aladdin looked dejected.

“You’ve still got one wish left,” said Sora.

Having reappeared from somewhere, the Genie grinned at Aladdin. “Gotcha. Time for me to make a prince outta this guy! The floor’s all yours, Al!”

“But…” Torn, Aladdin looked up at the Genie.

“Now, now, don’t you worry about little ol’ me! Sure, I’d love to be free, but like they always say—genies can’t be choosers. Besides, you must be pretty miffed about that whole puppet-of-Jafar thing. Go on, Al. Wish for what’s really in your heart. Be a prince, get the girl.” The Genie had his hands on his hips, almost as if he had to explain something to a child.

“I wish…,” Aladdin began.

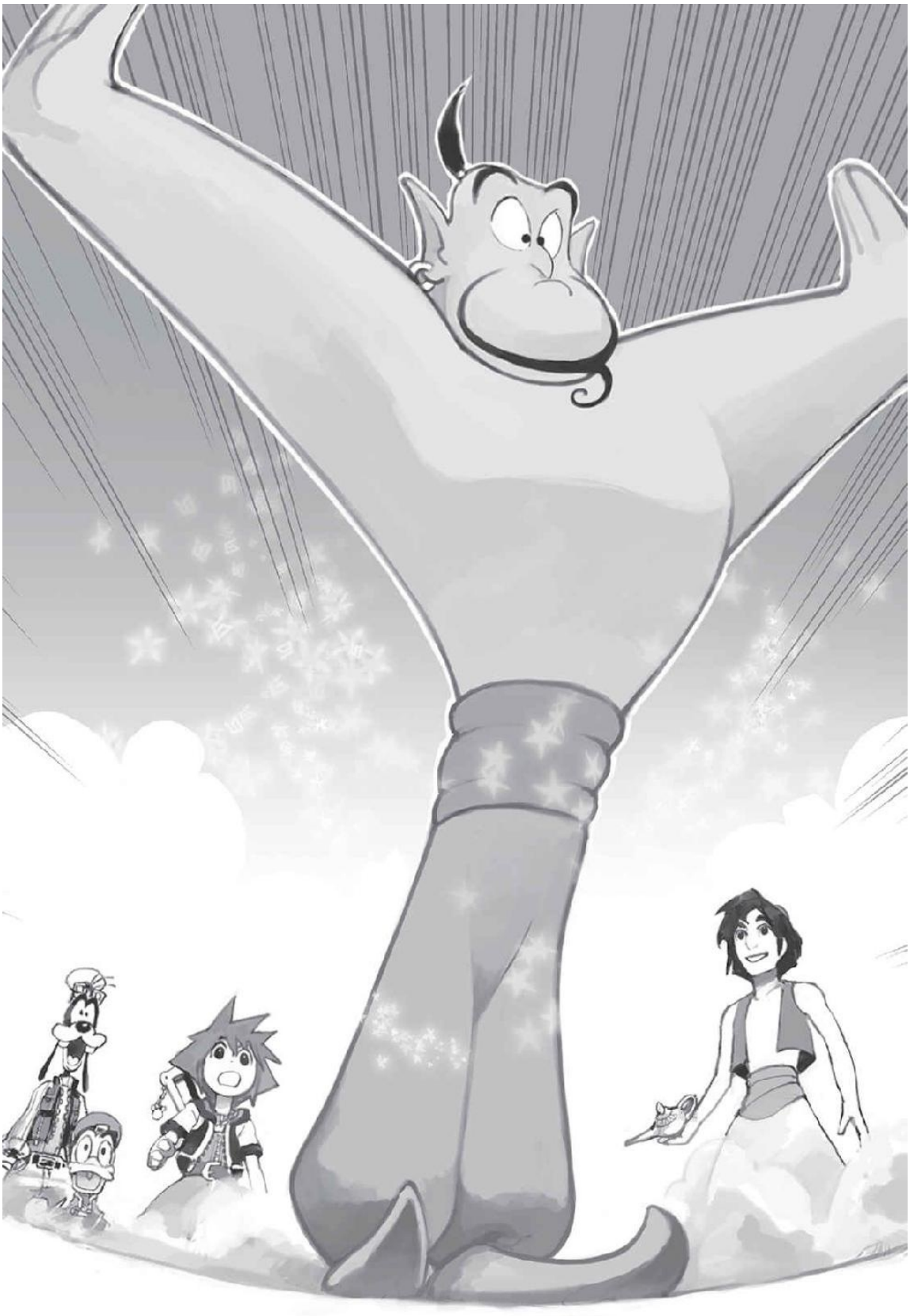
“All right, here we go!” The Genie raised his index finger, ready to work his magic, but what Aladdin said was…

“…for your freedom, Genie!”

“Wait, what?!” He tumbled back in the air, end over end, and from his lower half, which trailed off into smoke, two legs sprouted. He landed on his new feet. “But, Al…?!”

“Now no one like Jafar can use you for evil ever again. Genie, you’re free!” said Aladdin, beaming.

“Al…I’ll never forget this. But what about Jasmine? What are you gonna do?”



“I was wrong, Genie. If I used your magic to win Jasmine…I’d be no better than Jafar. Jasmine means the world to me. I want to show her the real me.”

The real me…, Sora thought. *The one who forgets people’s names…*

If everyone knew that I was forgetting them, wouldn’t they be mad at me?

No… No, they wouldn’t get mad. Anyway, I won’t forget all the things I learned from them.

Like what Aladdin taught me… That it’s important to keep a promise.

“Thanks, Sora,” Aladdin said.

He grinned back. “Good luck!”

“Good luck to you, too.” Aladdin held out his hand to shake.

“Huh? What for?”

“I was ready to give up back there, but what you said kept me going. That’s when it hit me… You must be looking for someone you care about, too.”

Yeah… There are people we care about, and we’re fighting so we can see them again.

“We are. And we have to keep searching,” said Sora. “So good luck with Jasmine. I hope she likes you back!”

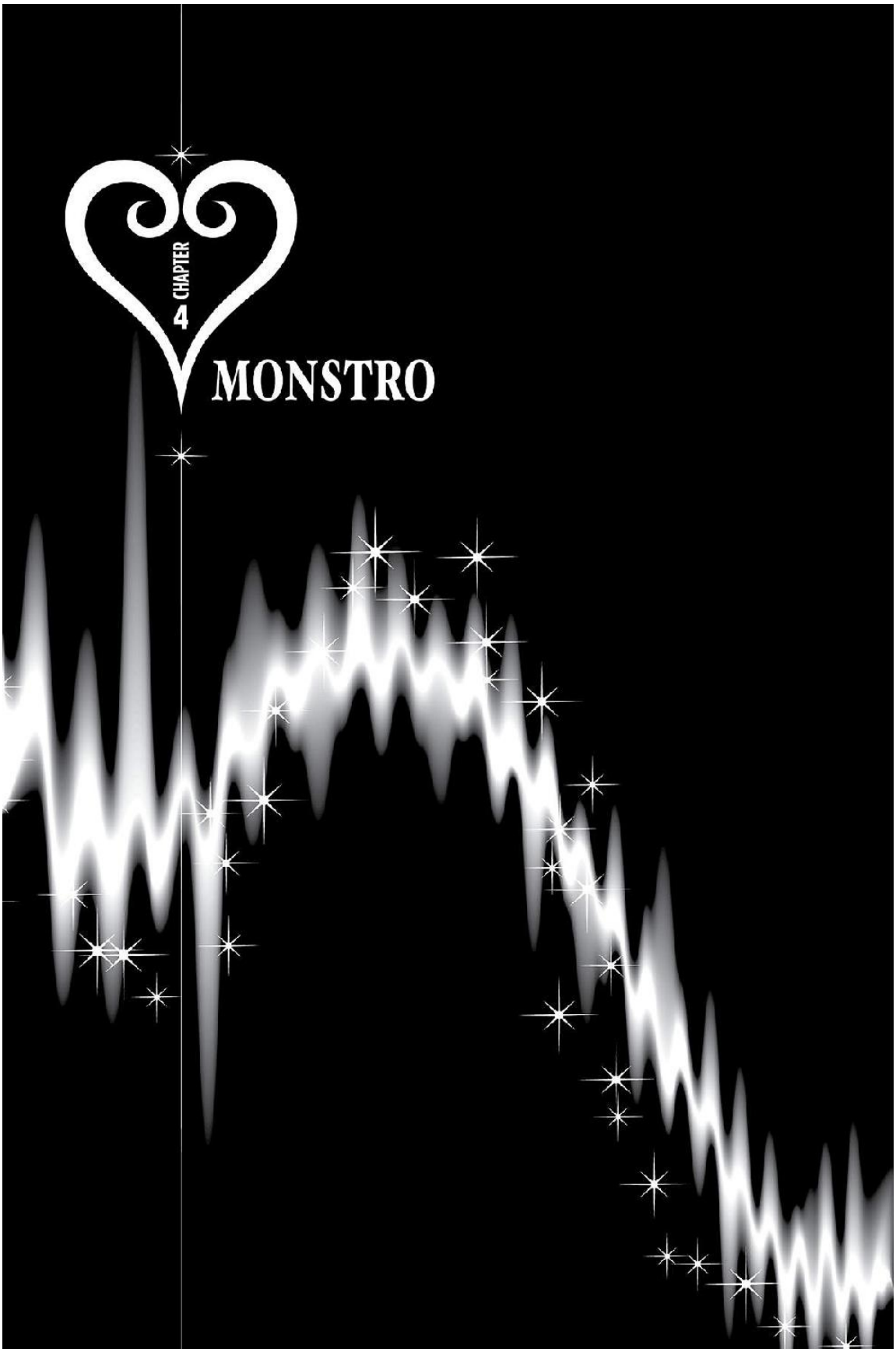
He took Aladdin’s hand and shook it firmly. And then, in the wall of the ruins, a door appeared.

“Sora!” Goofy called.

“Okay! Let’s go!” Sora replied and started toward the door. “We’re off, Aladdin!”

“Here’s to both our wishes coming true, then. Take care, Sora!” Aladdin and the Genie watched them go.

To find the people we care about…that’s why we’re here, Sora thought again. *But what does this castle have in store for us?*


CHAPTER
4
MONSTRO

CHAPTER 4

MONSTRO

I fill the sketchbook with drawings.
Back then, we laughed together. We yelled together. We played together.
The memories of dreams—I make them into drawings, one after another.
Look… Sora, do you remember that cave?
We doodled on the wall together.
And there was the beach.
I was always fighting with you and Riku on the beach, but every time we would make up before long.
Your memories…and my dreams.
I wonder if there's a place where they will meet.
I want them to meet… I want to put them together.
That's the dream that I'm drawing.

Hey, Sora… Do you remember?

WHEN THEY CAME THROUGH THE DOOR, IT WAS INTO another marble hall. Sora paused, standing still.

Goofy heard his footsteps stop and looked back at him. “Is somethin’ wrong?”

“I remember!” Sora blurted.

Donald turned, too. “Remember what?”

“There was another girl!”

“What? A girl? Where?” Goofy looked around for her.

“No, no, I mean on the islands, where I used to live.”

“Oh, you mean, uh… Des… Dusty…” Goofy cocked his head. “What was it again?”

“Destiny Islands!” Sora closed his eyes for a moment after he said it. The sea, the blue sky, the white sand.

It’s all there—I remember it just fine. I could never forget my islands.

And then…there was another thing he remembered. “Besides Kairi and Riku, there was one other girl I was friends with. The four of us played together all the time.”

The other girl back on the islands. It was that girl, I just know it. The girl I saw on the last floor here.

Jiminy Cricket hopped out from Sora’s pocket. “Another friend…? Seems to me that’s the first time you’ve mentioned her.”

“Yeah…I guess I forgot all about her.”

But why did I forget until now? Sora wondered. *There was another girl we played with, I know there was.*

“I think…she just suddenly went away when I was still little,” he remembered aloud.

Right. She left, and then I forgot.

I forgot about my friend just because she went away…?

“That’s funny,” said Donald, puzzled. “What do you think made you remember now?”

“I’m not sure. But it’s been coming back in pieces as we go through the castle.”

What he was sure of was that she really had been on the islands with them.

“Gawrsh, do ya remember her name?” Goofy asked.

Sora looked down. “…No, I can’t. I feel pretty dumb. We said we wouldn’t forget our friends, and now…I can’t even remember her name.”

He could remember what she looked like, but not her name. What could it

have been…?

"Is there anything else ya remember about her?" said Goofy.

Anything else…

"Try telling us more!" Donald added.

"Talking about her might help you remember her name," said Jiminy.

"Well, uhh… She was quiet, and she was always drawing."

She was always sitting on the sandy beach, drawing in a sketchbook with crayons.

Riku and I were playing with wooden swords. One day we ran over to her. It was the beach on Destiny Island.

"……, you can play with us, too!"

"No. I'm drawing." She shook her head, but then she looked at Riku. "I know! I'll draw you two."

"Draw us?!" Riku and I both said at once.

"Okay! Draw me!"

"No way! Draw me first!"

We were practically butting heads in front of her, we both wanted her to draw us so badly.

"No, I'm first!"

"No, me!"

She laughed at us a little.

"Then, let's fight for it!" Riku held up his wooden sword.

"Yeah, well, I'm gonna win!"

So we had a sword fight on the beach. Clack, clack, clack! *The sound of the wooden swords echoed down the beach.*

And then, by the time somebody won, what she'd drawn in her sketchbook was a picture of the two of us laughing.

But…

"But one day, she was gone, just like that."

She left the islands so suddenly.

"How come?" asked Goofy.

Sora's fingers tightened on the Keyblade. "I don't know. I think the grown-ups knew the reason. They might have even tried to explain some of it to me. But I was little. I probably didn't understand."

Why did she leave…?

“I remember crying after she was gone. But…that’s all. I still can’t remember her name.”

I used to cry at anything… But maybe Riku cried, too, when he was by himself. And after she was gone, we didn’t talk about her anymore. I guess we didn’t want to because it would make us sad.

“But, y’know, you just remembered a lot, and you forgot that until a little while ago,” said Goofy.

“I bet you’ll remember her name in no time, too!” Donald chimed in.

Sora nodded and smiled at them. “Yeah.”

“Hmm…” Jiminy frowned. “But I must say, it’s very odd.”

“What is?” said Goofy.

“We all thought that going farther into the castle would just make us lose our memories… But maybe forgetting things is the only way to reach the memories buried deeper down inside each of us.”

Goofy folded his arms. “So we should forget in order to remember?”

“It’s like those guys were saying… ‘Our most precious memories lie so deep in our hearts that they’re out of reach,’” said Sora. “All that stuff about finding being losing and losing being finding… I didn’t get it at first, but maybe this is what they meant.”

Like finding the entrance to a cave hidden in the bushes… Memories hidden beneath memories were coming back to him.

“Gee, Sora, I’m getting kinda jealous!” Donald said with a jump.

“How come? Is there stuff you wanna forget?” asked Goofy.

Donald stamped his foot. “No! I wanna remember important stuff that I forgot!”

“Gawrsh, I wonder if we have any memories like that…”

As Goofy stood there thinking, Donald ran ahead. “C’mon, Goofy! Let’s get going. We’ve got to forget things faster!”

“Wait up, Donald!” Goofy hurried after him.

Sora and Jiminy looked at each other and shared a tiny smile, then went after the other two.

And meanwhile, elsewhere in the castle…

Axel and Larxene peered into the great crystal ball.

“It looks like Sora’s memories have begun to awaken… Just as we intended.” With a sly laugh, Larxene turned to him.

“We’ll continue with our plan. Let’s see how far they’ll go.” Axel looked up

at her and a faint smile came to his lips. “About time for the next step, wouldn’t you say?”

He walked away from the crystal ball, about to leave.

“Wait,” said Larxene with her arms folded. “You had your fun on the first floor. This time, it’s my turn.”

When he looked back, she was grinning. Axel gave in with a shrug.

“…Don’t break him,” he said in a low growl.

“Ohh, do I detect a soft spot?” Larxene teased.

“Sora is half one of us. He’s on our side.”

“You don’t trust me?” she said as she passed. “I know when to let up. I’m not stupid enough to break my toys.”

“Don’t forget. He’s the key. We need him if we’re going to take over the organization.”

At that, Larxene looked back, smiling so sweetly it was unsettling. “I know you’re in on it, too… But keep it under your hood, at least until the time is right, hmm?”

Then she vanished.

After she was gone, Axel smiled, his eyebrows lifting slightly. “You would have been wise to do the same, Larxene,” he murmured in the silence.

Running over the marble floor, Sora finally caught up to Donald. “Hey, c’mon! Slow down!”

“We’ve gotta get to the next world!” Donald hopped up and down in front of the door.

“Yeah, I know…”

I want to remember more about that girl…, Sora thought as he looked in his pocket for the card.

But then…

“Hello, Sora.”

Another someone in a black cloak was grinning at them—a woman with bright blond hair.

“I bet you work with Axel!” shouted Donald, dashing to Sora’s side.

“Aren’t you clever. The name’s Larxene.” She walked closer to them, unhurried. “Well? Are you enjoying your stay at the castle? I bet it’s nice to peel away all the worthless memories and awaken the true memories that lie deep in your heart.”

True memories… Did she mean his memories of that girl?

“But it seems that you’re still forgetting the most important thing here. When that poor girl hears that you’ve forgotten her name, why…it’ll just break her heart!” Larxene cried, her voice breaking for dramatic effect.

“Poor girl?” said Sora. “Do you know her?!”

Larxene shrugged and giggled.

“Is she…here?!”

Could she really be in the castle? Sora wondered. If she wasn’t, of course… there was no reason Larxene would know who she was.

“She sure is! You see, the bad guys are holding her captive somewhere deep inside the castle. And obviously, you’re the hero, so you’ll have to go save her. Although…”

Larxene didn’t so much run as glide in a blur right into Sora, sending him flying.

A star-shaped pendant fell out from his shirt and hit the floor.

“Sora!” Donald and Goofy dashed over to him.

Larxene winked at Sora. “Thing is, *I’m* a bad guy, so you have to go through me!”

Sora groaned. His line of sight landed on the pendant. “What’s that? Is that thing mine?” Still on the floor, he was staring at it.

A yellow star-shaped pendant. It was a good luck charm made out of a paopu fruit.

“What a shame! You’ve been wearing it all this time and forgot?” she said with an incredulous laugh.

I can’t remember…but I have to remember, Sora thought.

Hadn’t someone given it to him? Who?

“I’m making them so even if one of us gets lost, we’ll make it back here safe and sound. So the three of us will always be together.”

That girl had made the good luck charm for him…

“No, that’s not possible,” Larxene went on. “The memory must be engraved somewhere deep within your heart!”

But he couldn’t remember. He hadn’t even known he was carrying that thing around.

That girl’s name… Or anything about her…

“Think carefully, now. What, oh what, could it be? And who gave it to you?”

“Na… Na…mi……”

Sora felt as if his head was full of fog. He *should* remember—but he just couldn’t.

“See, Sora, you’re getting it now! Free your heart, free your memories!”

Sora!

He seemed to hear the girl’s voice from somewhere. Her name… Her name was…

“Nami… Naminé,” he murmured finally.

“Well, it’s about time! That’s right—Naminé. Yes, she’s the one who gave you that tacky little good luck charm. Not that you even bothered to remember!” Larxene chimed, not letting him get another word in edgewise. She stood over the fallen pendant, and her voice rose with theatrical indignation. “No surprise—seeing as you couldn’t even remember her *name*! Talk about heartless. I can’t believe you! It’d serve you right if I decided to smash this piece of junk!”

“Don’t touch it! Naminé gave me that! It’s important to me!” Sora stood up with the Keyblade ready.

I won’t let anyone break it. I made a promise to Naminé…

Well, he couldn’t remember yet exactly what he’d promised her, but…he’d promised.

“Oh, it’s important to you? Ten seconds ago you didn’t even know what it *was*!” Larxene leaped lightly into the air and attacked him.

“Augh!” Sora cried as she knocked him back again. Donald and Goofy ran to him.

“Hey! Don’t you pick on Sora! *Fire!*” Donald shouted.

Larxene easily dodged the spell. “Picking on him? Why, I would never! I’m just telling him the truth!”

In each hand, she held four little knives, and she slashed out at Sora with them.

“Ngh—” He barely managed to parry her last strike with the Keyblade.

“Sora!” Goofy ran up behind Larxene and knocked her off balance, giving Sora a chance to move in.

“What nice friends you have… But it’s time for you to go!” She hurled all eight knives at him.

Sora parried every one, sending them careening away. “I’m not going anywhere—I have to save Naminé!”

“There, that’s the spirit!”

“Nobody asked you!” He ran in under her guard and struck with the Keyblade, knocking her back hard.

“Hmph! You’re not as bad as I thought. You really are a hero. A heartless hero!”

“I’m *not* heartless!”

“Does it hurt because it’s the truth? You’re just a baby, after all. Well, if you’re gonna be a baby, here you go,” Larxene said offhandedly and tossed another card at him.

“Whoa! Hey—”

“I created another card from your memories, you know. Be a good boy and say ‘thanks.’ Ta-ta!” With that, she vanished.

“Wait! Larxene!” Sora ran to where she’d been standing, but she was gone without a trace. “Where are you?! Don’t you dare hide from me! Show yourself!”

“Sora, calm down. She’s not coming back,” said Jiminy, jumping out of his pocket. Finally Sora stopped shouting.

“Sora…” Goofy looked at him sadly.

“I hate this,” Sora muttered. “Why did it have to be someone like that…who made me remember Naminé…?”

Donald and Goofy looked at each other, at a loss for words.

“C’mon, Sora… Let’s go,” Goofy said tentatively.

“Yeah.” Sora climbed the stairs, then shouted back behind him, “But those guys are keeping Naminé prisoner! We have to help her!”

And he held the card up to the door.

Noticing that Larxene had returned, Axel looked up from the crystal ball.

“Whew… Throwing that battle wore me out,” she sighed.

“Really? It looked to me like you just plain lost.” Axel smirked.

Larxene raised her finely shaped eyebrows. “How dare you! You don’t appreciate the nuances of—”

“An ungainly effort,” a low voice nastily broke in. “Just as Axel says.”

“Vexen!” Larxene started.

The man she faced wore a black cloak, the same as them. His face was even more ashen than his dull blond hair, and his glance was viciously cold.

“How could you let yourself be humbled by someone of such meager significance? You shame the organization.”

Larxene sulked at his rant, biting her lip.

“How can we help you, Vexen? It’s not often we see you topside,” said Axel, trying to make the conversation productive, though he didn’t look away from the crystal ball.

“I came to lend you a hand. You obviously believe this Sora has much potential, but I remain unconvinced he is truly worth such coddling. An experiment, I think, would show if he is really of any value to us.” Vexen’s voice was devoid of emotion. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the crystal ball.

“Hmph. Well, here we go again,” said Larxene. “So it’s an excuse for you to carry out your little experiments. That’s all.”

“I’m a scientist. Experiments are what I do, yes,” Vexen replied with a hint of a smirk.

“Whatever. You can do what you want,” Axel said lightly. “But you know, I get the feeling that testing Sora is just a way for you to test your valet.”

“Valet? He’s the product of pure research.” Vexen’s self-satisfied retort showed the only feeling he was capable of having.

“He’s a toy. That’s what he is,” Larxene shot back.

Vexen gave her a sharp look. “Hmph. You could stand to keep your mouth shut about things you don’t understand.”

“Anyway… Since you came all the way up here, you’re gonna want this.” Axel gave him a cocky smile. “A humble gift for my elder! I hope you use it to put on a good show for us.”

“Oh, how very helpful of you. Well, then, I’ll be using that… Come along.” That last was directed at a boy with silver hair.

Through the door, Sora looked around at their new surroundings—parti-colored, strangely springy walls.

“What a weird place! Everything’s kinda soft, and…it smells funny…”

“It’s bouncy!” Donald said, jumping.

“Do you remember comin’ here before?” Goofy asked Sora.

The worlds they visited inside Castle Oblivion were made out of his memories—at least, so the people in the black cloaks had been telling them. But Sora couldn’t really remember this world.

“Not very well… But anyway, let’s go!” Sora ran ahead.

Whether he could remember things or not wasn’t the problem—he had to help Naminé!

“Gee…” Goofy only stood there with his arms folded.

“Goofy!” Sora shouted.

He cocked his head in concentration. “But…didn’t we meet somebody here?”

“Oh… Did we?” Donald paused to think, too.

“C’mon, who cares who we met here before!” Sora fumed at them.

“Oh… I guess it doesn’t matter… It’s nice and warm in here, after all. I’m startin’ to feel like a nap,” said Goofy.

A little boy’s high voice spoke from behind him. “I think you should be a little more worried.”

“Who’s there?!” Donald demanded.

“You’re inside the belly of Monstro the whale,” said the boy.

At that, Jiminy Cricket jumped out of Sora’s pocket. “Why, I know that voice… Pinocchio! Pinocch, it’s you! Come on out now!”

The boy laughed. “Is that you, Jiminy? Gosh, I thought I’d never see you again!”

Sora did have the feeling that he’d seen Pinocchio before.

They’d been on the Gummi Ship, and the whale had swallowed the whole ship—and they had met Pinocchio… But hadn’t there been someone else important…?

“Oh, Pinocch, there’s no way you wouldn’t find me again. I’m your conscience. And your conscience will always be your guide. Remember?” Jiminy said gently like a kind teacher.

“Sure, Jiminy. And I’ve been a good boy, promise. I didn’t tell a single lie.” As Pinocchio said that his nose grew longer. “Uh-oh!”

“Well, for Pete’s sake!” Jiminy sighed, sounding terribly disappointed.

“Oops… But how did *you* end up inside Monstro anyway?” Pinocchio asked Sora, trying to hide his elongated nose.

“We, uh, sort of used a special way…,” Sora started.

“It’s kinda hard to explain,” said Donald.

“Oh… I was hoping you could help me and Father get out of here.” Pinocchio sighed and let his hands fall. His nose was back to its normal size.

“Well, I’ll be! Geppetto’s here, too?” said Jiminy.

“He sure is. Follow me!” Pinocchio dashed away.

“Let’s go!” Sora said as Jiminy hopped back into his pocket, and they followed Pinocchio.

In a more spacious part of the whale sat a boat, and on the deck, a lone old man paced restlessly.

“Where have you gone… Oh, Pinocchio…”

“Geppetto!” Jiminy called out to him.

“Bless my soul, it’s Jiminy Cricket. How in the world did you get here?” For all that, the old man didn’t sound terribly shocked.

“Well, you tell me! How does a clockmaker wind up in the belly of a whale?” said Jiminy from atop Sora’s head as the latter climbed up on deck.

“I set out to sea in search of Pinocchio after he ran away, and wouldn’t you know, this great big whale swallowed up my little boat…,” Geppetto said disconsolately, then brightened again. “But lucky me—I found my son here inside the whale!”

“Now you can’t get out, though, can you?” Sora folded his arms. “You’re stuck in the belly of a whale…”

Being stuck…it’s just like being kept prisoner, he thought. *It must be terrible. What if Naminé feels the same way right now…*

He had to help her and soon.

“Oh, it’s not so bad, not if Pinocchio and I are together. There’s nothing better than being reunited with someone you care about.” Geppetto beamed.

Sora understood that very well.

“I don’t care if I’m trapped here, so long as I’ve got Pinocchio. He’s such a good boy.”

“Well, he still tells fibs,” said Jiminy. “But with a little help from me…”

Gepetto laughed. “Oh, Jiminy. You worry too much.”

“Speaking of Pinocchio… Where’d he go?” Donald glanced all around.

“Where’d he get to this time?” said Sora, also searching. He could see a number of shipwrecks scattered about, but no sign of Pinocchio.

“Hmm… I suppose he’s off exploring,” said Geppetto. “That boy has been poking around just about everywhere inside this monster. He won’t tell me why it’s so important. I tell him it’s dangerous, but he won’t listen.”

“That boy sure is a handful!” Jiminy complained, then looked up at Sora. “If you don’t mind…”

I want to go see Naminé, Sora thought, *and save her… But finding Pinocchio will have to come first. I know how Geppetto feels. He just wants to see someone who’s special to him.*

“I know, I know,” he told Jiminy. “You want us to help find him, right? C’mon, guys, let’s get going!”

They jumped down from the deck and went deeper into the whale.

Heartless appeared out of the floor and the walls, making Donald jump. “*Wak!* We’ve got trouble!”

“Take this!” Sora swung the Keyblade and mowed through them.

“Hey!” Goofy yelped.

Sora turned. “What’s the matter, Goofy?”

“I just saw Pinocchio over thatta way!”

“What, where?” said Donald, kicking a Heartless in what might be its face.

“Over there!” Goofy began to run in that direction, followed by Donald and Sora. But the Heartless followed them.

“Enough already! *Fira!*”

Donald's magic had gotten a little stronger again apparently. A good medium-sized fireball dispatched the Heartless.

"There! That way!" Goofy dashed ahead at full speed, and it was all Sora could do to keep up.

"Whoa, you found him?" said Sora.

"Well… I dunno if I found him, but I remembered that he went that way."

"Remembered?"

Goofy seemed to remember a lot more than Sora did.

"I mean, I get the feeling he went that way when we were here before, too. But…"

"But?" Sora asked, and Goofy stopped in his tracks.

Donald didn't come to a halt quite as quickly. His beak mashed into Goofy's back. "*Wak!* Don't stop all of a sudden like that!"

"What're you doing, Goofy?" Sora stamped his feet in place. "C'mon!"

"Er, but… Wasn't there someone else with Pinocchio?" Goofy stood with his arms folded, thinking hard.

Sora looked down. He couldn't remember if there had been anyone else.

There was so much he was forgetting. But the more he forgot, the more his memories of Naminé were coming back.

"Do you remember, Donald?" said Sora, without looking at him.

Donald only frowned. "Hmm…"

"Hey, Sora…"

"What, Goofy?"

"D'you remember why we went into this castle?" Goofy asked him earnestly.

"Well, yeah—we came to find Riku and the king," Sora said without any hesitation.

"That's good! You remember!"

"'Course I do!" Sora retorted a little angrily and hung his head.

He *had* forgotten that—well, not completely, but he'd forgotten what it really meant. It had left his heart as he got more and more intent on remembering Naminé. Was that how memories ended up disappearing, bit by bit?

"I think…maybe we met Riku in here before…," Goofy said cautiously. "Am I makin' it up?"

"Huh?!" Sora folded his arms again. Had they seen Riku here? He didn't remember—the memory just wasn't there.

"Riku took Pinocchio and… Gee, I don't remember too well, either…"

"I don't know… I'm sorry." Sora's shoulders slumped miserably.

“What about you, Donald?”

“Nope, can’t remember…” Donald hung his head, too.

“Gawrsh… I’m not quite sure, either. Maybe it’s just me, after all.”

They all stared at the springy floor.

Sora had the feeling they’d come here before, but he could hardly remember anything about what had happened inside Monstro. The one thing he could say for certain was that somewhere in here—in Castle Oblivion, not in Monstro—Naminé was being held captive, and he had to help her.

Then they heard a high scream from far off.

“Pinocchio!” They ran toward the sound.

The space they were in had been more or less open like a corridor, but now it looked different. They must have made it to Monstro’s stomach.

“Pinocchio!”

Up ahead of them, a single Heartless was poised to attack the wooden boy.

“Blizzara!” Donald hurried to wave his wand. A chunk of ice hit the Heartless and it disappeared.

“Pinocchio! What are you thinking?” cried Jiminy, jumping out of his usual pocket as Sora came near. “You know Geppetto worries when you wander off by yourself.”

“I’m sorry…,” said Pinocchio in a tiny voice, still sitting where he’d fallen on his behind.

“What’re you doing, anyway? It must be something important, right?” Sora took Pinocchio’s hand and helped him up.

“Um…yeah, I’m looking for treasure!” But as he said that, Pinocchio’s nose began to grow.

“Oh, here we go again!” Jiminy scolded, hopping around him.

“But…”

“Aw, don’t be so hard on the little fella, Jiminy.” Goofy scooped up the cricket and put him atop his own head and turned to Pinocchio. “We promise not to get mad, Pinocchio. Is that why you’re afraid to tell?”

Pinocchio only hung his head.

“Is that it?” Sora peered into Pinocchio’s face and received a tiny nod in return.

“No need to fret. You can tell us the truth—we’ll understand. C’mon, put your faith in us!” Goofy went on, but Pinocchio still looked worried.

“It’s okay, you can trust us,” said Sora.

Then Pinocchio looked up at them. “I was looking for a way out. Father says he’s happy, but it’s my fault we’re stuck here. I shouldn’t have run away from home. I want to help Father get back out of here. But he’ll worry if I tell him what I’m doing.”

Jiminy took off his top hat and clutched it. “So that’s why you thought you had to tell a lie.”

“You did it ’cos you love your dad!” Goofy grinned.

Donald jumped and spoke up, “Now all you need is courage!”

“What?” Pinocchio stared at him.

“Tell Geppetto the truth. With a little courage, you can do it!”

“But…” Still uncertain, Pinocchio looked down again.

“If you tell him how you really feel, I bet he’ll help you find a way out,” said Goofy. But Pinocchio didn’t move.

“We’ll give you a hand, too,” Sora added.

“Really? You’ll help us?”

Everyone else nodded.

“Okay, I’ll give it a try! Wish me luck, Jiminy!” Pinocchio looked up at the cricket finally.

“No more keeping secrets, then,” said Jiminy. “Have we got a deal?”

“Sure! I’ll be brave and tell Father how I really feel. No lies this time!” He grinned.

“Great! Then your nose won’t—”

Before Jiminy could finish the sentence, the floor beneath them shook.

“What’s happening?!” Sora looked around with his Keyblade ready.

“Whoa!”

A huge Heartless sprang up out of the ground, right in front of Pinocchio, and opened its wide mouth.

“Pinocchio! Run for it!” shouted Jiminy. But the big rotund Heartless—the Parasite Cage—reached out with its long tentacle arms to lift up Pinocchio and dump him in its mouth.

Shouting his name, Sora ran to him, but the creature’s mouth held Pinocchio in like cage bars.

“Help! I’m trapped!”

“Hold on!” Sora swung the Keyblade at the Parasite Cage’s mouth. The impact clanged as if it were really metal.

Donald hurled spells at it. *“Fira!”*

But nothing seemed to help. Pinocchio curled up in terror.

“Pinocchio! Don’t give up!” Sora shouted as he kept striking the Parasite Cage. Finally its right arm went limp.

“But…I’m scared!”

“C’mon, Pinocchio! Be brave! *Fira!*” Donald yelled.

“Huh?” Pinocchio looked up. “But…how…?”

With Donald’s magic attacks, the creature’s left arm stopped moving. But its hard metallic body seemed practically invulnerable.

“Just have a little courage! Try fighting your way out!” said Sora.

“Courage…” Pinocchio screwed his eyes shut and jumped as hard as he could.

The Parasite Cage made a terrible shriek and opened its mouth. Pinocchio jumped out, and then—

“Gotcha!” Sora hurled the Keyblade into the gaping mouth. It spun around, dealing a nasty blow from inside, and as it flew back into Sora’s waiting hand, the creature turned to light and disappeared.

“Whew…” Sora slumped over in relief.

Jiminy Cricket, who had been hiding in his pocket, jumped out and hopped to Pinocchio’s side. “Are you all right, Pinocch?”

“Don’t worry, I’m okay. Just a little sticky…” Pinocchio got to his feet and flashed them a smile.

“That was great, Pinocchio!” said Sora, grinning back.

“Aw, you guys helped. But, you know, I have a great idea! That thing spit me out when I started fighting back…”

Donald looked confused. *“Wak?”*

“So, maybe we could try the same thing with Monstro…?” said Pinocchio with a mischievous glint.

“Oh, right! If we’re lucky, Monstro might cough us up!” Sora replied. Pinocchio nodded.

“Great idea! Let’s go deeper inside and try it!” Donald exclaimed, waving his wand around as if he could hardly wait to get moving.

Pinocchio ran up to him. “I’m going, too!”

Jiminy wouldn’t hear of it. “No, it’s too dangerous.”

“Aw, c’mon…”

“You should be with Geppetto,” Jiminy told him. “No use escaping from Monstro if you two get separated again!”

Knowing he was right, Pinocchio sulked. “No fair…”

“It’s okay. Leave this to us,” said Sora, smiling.

“Oh… All right. Be careful, everybody!”

Sora and the others nodded to Pinocchio and headed deeper into the whale’s belly.

“Here goes…!”

They fought through Heartless farther into Monstro.

“Maybe we didn’t meet Riku in here after all…,” Goofy mumbled.

“But Riku and King Mickey might still be in this castle,” said Sora, looking back at Goofy as he ran.

“What makes you think so?” Donald asked.

“Just a feeling, I guess. Didn’t we all get that feeling when we first walked into the castle?”

Sora could still remember that clearly. *We all felt that way at the entrance. I’m sure of it.*

“Then we better hurry!” said Goofy.

“Up there! That’s as far as we can go!” Donald pointed at a dead end.

“But…how should we shake things up? Should we run into the walls?”

Donald hit the wall with his wand a few times, and the floor under them began to shake. *“Quack!”*

“All right, let’s hit the walls and floor as hard as we can!” said Sora.

“Got it!”

They kicked and stomped, and struck the walls with their weapons. The rippling tremors in their surroundings got stronger and stronger until a catastrophic wave went through the floor…

“It’s working!” Just as Sora said that, the wind hit them. “Whoa!”

“Wak!”

“Wah-hoooey!”

And they were blasted away.

“Ow, ow, ow…”

The trio woke up on a rocky shore. Sora got to his feet, rubbing his bruised hip. Donald and Goofy were sprawled out nearby, but they were awake, too.

“Now I know what getting shot out of a cannon feels like!” said Goofy as he stood.

Donald didn’t bother to get up yet, but looked around. “Where’re Pinocchio and his dad?”

Hearing that, Jiminy Cricket hopped out of Sora’s pocket and paced in

circles. “Well, they’re not here. They must have gotten out safely,” he said, looking up at Sora.

“Without you, Jiminy?” Sora teased. “I thought there was no escaping your conscience!”

“I don’t mind being left behind, as long as they’re both safe. Maybe, just maybe…Pinocchio doesn’t need me that much after all.” Jiminy’s smile was wistful.

“What do you mean?” Donald wanted to know.

“That little puppet used to have trouble telling right from wrong. But he’s come a long way. Maybe he doesn’t need Jiminy Cricket anymore.” He looked into the distance. “Maybe he’s got a conscience of his own, and he’s got to think for himself.”

“Don’t you remember what Geppetto said? There’s nothing better than being reunited with someone you care about. I bet Pinocchio’s counting the days till he can see you again.”

Jiminy nodded and hopped up onto Sora’s head.

“Well, what do you know? You might be right.”

“Someone you care about, huh…?” said Goofy, looking at Sora.

“The person we care about is…the king!” Donald exclaimed.

“There’s a lot of other people we care about too…but I can’t remember ’em too well now…” Goofy looked terribly anxious about it.

“But we won’t forget the king,” said Donald. “It’ll be okay!”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Goofy nodded.

“The ones I care about are Riku…and Naminé,” said Sora.

“And Kairi, too!” Goofy added.

Sora stopped short.

Right. He’d promised Kairi…that he would come back.

…And he’d forgotten about it.

No, it wasn’t that he’d totally forgotten…he just hadn’t remembered. Even though he’d made such an important promise…

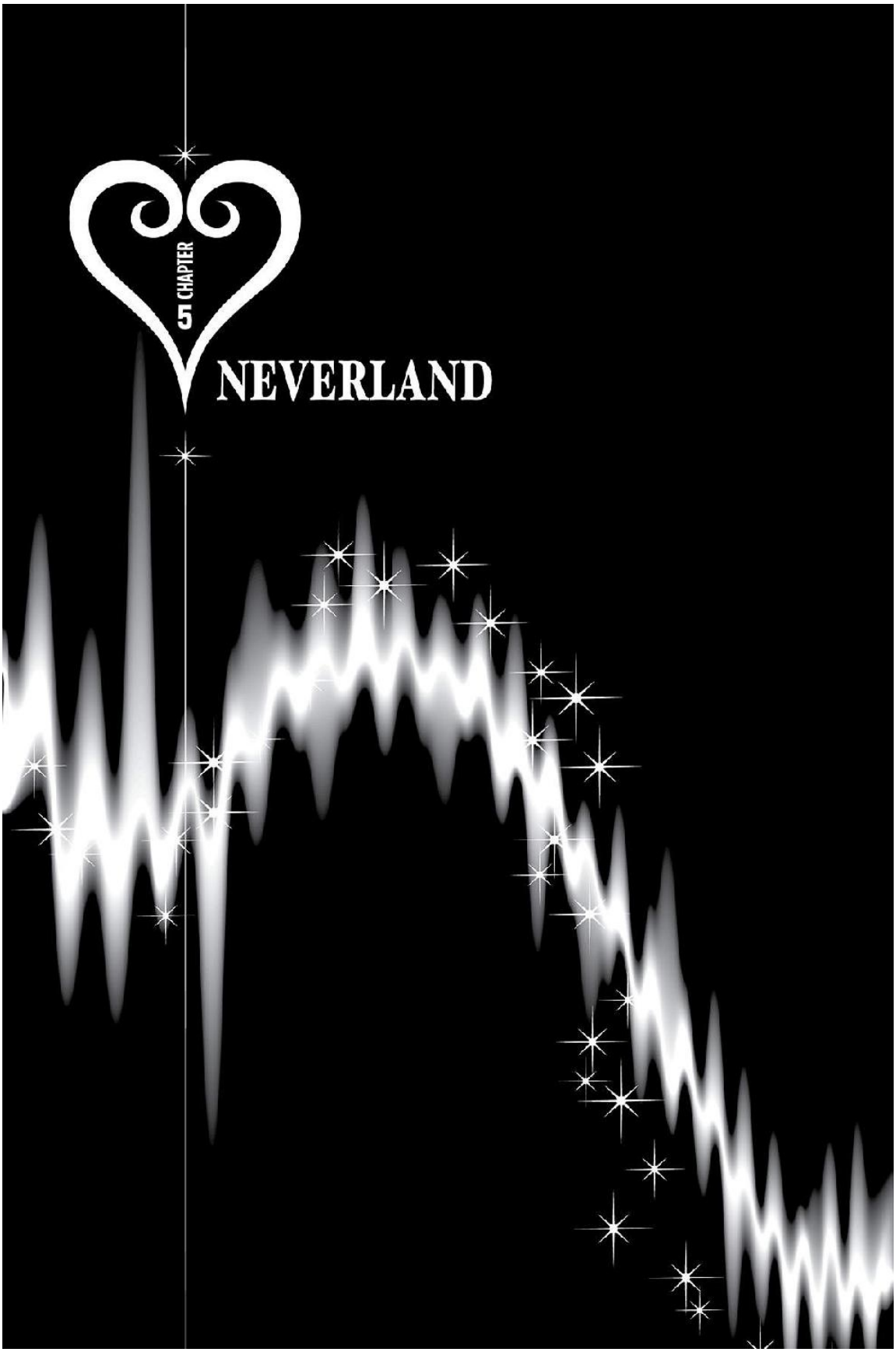
And if Goofy hadn’t said anything about her, Sora might have gone on not remembering. Just like he’d forgotten about Naminé because everyone had stopped talking about her.

He couldn’t let that happen. Kairi…and Riku. He had to go home with them, back to their islands.

“There’s the door!” Donald pointed at a door in a big boulder.

“Let’s go!”

“Right!”
The three ran to the door.


5 CHAPTER
NEVERLAND

CHAPTER 5

NEVERLAND

I color in my drawings with pastels.
White sand…blue sky, warm sunlight… The three of us were always smiling so brightly.
How much of it was a dream…and how much of it was real?
Can you see?
The world is so full of color, but I'm here in this room of cold white marble. All I can do is draw in this sketchbook.
Do you know now? I wonder if you do. I want you to know.
I'm here.
But am I supposed to exist?

Hey, Sora… Tell me.

THROUGH THE DOOR, THERE WAS ANOTHER OF THE same marble halls.

“Gawrsh, d’you think someone’s gonna jump out at us again?” said Goofy, walking gingerly, practically on tiptoe. If this room was made like all the others, there would be a stairway up ahead, and the next room upstairs would have a door leading to another world.

“Does this castle have a top?” Donald wondered.

“Well, it can’t just go on forever, can it?” said Sora.

“Hmm… I dunno…” Donald looked up at the magnificently decorated ceiling. Chandeliers made of marble just like the flower carvings shone down.

All the rooms looked the same with their cold bright marble—so identical that it was getting hard to say how far they had come or whether they were really moving at all.

“Maybe when we get to the top of the castle, we’ll find where they’re keeping Naminé,” said Goofy.

“Yeah, maybe—so let’s go!” The moment Sora began to run, they saw a silhouette up ahead, moving tremulously.

“*Wak!* Someone’s there!” Donald rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

“…Riku?!” cried Sora.

A silver-haired boy stood there—Riku, who they had to leave on the other side when they closed the door to Kingdom Hearts.

“Riku! Is it really you?!” Sora flung himself forward, ready to seize him in a hug. Riku looked just the same as when they’d parted, in his yellow shirt and blue pants—not like when Ansem had possessed him, turning his outfit all strange and inky dark. Sora felt a little relieved at that. “What’re *you* doing here?”

“Not happy to see me?” Riku’s voice was cold, stopping Sora in his tracks. “Let me know if I’m getting in the way of something more *important*.”

“Huh? I didn’t mean that…” Sora hung his head. Riku hit the mark too easily.

“Hmph. Never mind the excuses. I bet you’d all but forgotten about me.”

“Are you crazy?” Sora protested. “C’mon, I came all this way looking for *you*!”

They really had been looking for Riku and King Mickey. And he’d started looking for Naminé on the way, too, but he still meant to find Riku.

“But you’re not anymore, are you?” said Riku. “Now the only one you’re trying to find is Naminé. You don’t care about me.”

“That’s not true!” Sora burst out.

“We’ve been looking for you and King Mickey and Naminé, too!” Donald shouted from behind him.

“Well, Sora, you never gave a thought to her feelings, did you?”

“Naminé’s…?” Sora mumbled, caught off guard.

“Ha. I knew it. You don’t really care about her, either. Just because you want to see Naminé—well, it doesn’t go both ways. But that wouldn’t have crossed your mind, huh?”

No…Sora hadn’t thought of that.

I thought Naminé must want to see me, too… When I want to see her so badly…

“But…,” Sora stammered.

“In fact, Naminé doesn’t even want to look at your face,” Riku added.

“Why not?!”

He couldn’t understand it. He thought it would be only natural for friends to want to be reunited. But Naminé really didn’t want to meet him at all…?

“You should ask your memories…about why Naminé disappeared from the islands. If you remembered that, you’d know.”

“Did I…? Did I do something? Is it my fault?” Sora asked desperately.

He really couldn’t remember.

What I remember…is Naminé suddenly left one day. I couldn’t believe it, and I was crying so hard… That’s all.

But was I really crying because she was gone?

It feels like maybe there was something else, something sadder than Naminé leaving, that made me cry like that… But I don’t know.

I can’t remember.

Was it my fault? Did she leave because of something I did?

What if I forgot on purpose because I couldn’t accept that it was my fault she went away…?

“Riku…” Sora was pleading.

“Go home, Sora. I’ll take care of Naminé. Anyone who goes near her…has to go through *me*!” As Riku said that a dark fog enveloped him…and he changed, his clothes turned dark and armor-like.

Now he looks…the same as when Ansem was controlling him?!

“What—what’s wrong with you?!” cried Sora. “We’re supposed to be friends!”

“Please, Sora. Since when did you ever care about me? Naminé’s not the only one who got sick of looking at you. So did I!”

Riku brandished a sword that looked like some kind of demon's black wing and charged Sora.

"Riku, stop it!" Just in time, Sora blocked Riku's strike with the Keyblade. *"…Ngh!"*

"So, you've gotten a little bit stronger, huh?" Smirking, Riku jumped back.

"What do you mean you're sick of looking at me?" Sora yelled but kept his distance. "Why would you say that?!"

"Hmph… Because I was holding it in until now, that's all. I've never liked you, you know." After firing off those words, Riku leaped high and brought his sword down…

"Sora!" Goofy tried to run into the fray.

"Stay back!" Sora shouted, blocking Riku's sword again. "I'm gonna take him."

Goofy and Donald looked at each other, and Goofy lowered his shield, and Donald his wand.

"If you're serious…then I'm fighting for real, too…!" Sora forced Riku's sword aside and swung the Keyblade without even pausing to breathe. Thrown off balance, Riku barely managed to block him.

"Hey, are you sure I got stronger, or are you slipping?" With that Sora showed him a slight smile and pushed against Riku's sword with all his might.

They'd had so many arguments before. So many pretend sword fights. And so many times they'd made up. So why would this time be any different?

Inch by inch, Sora drove him back and shouted his name just as Riku shoved off and ran for the stairs. With a small angry sound, he hurtled up the stairs.

"Riku! Please, wait!" Sora tried to follow him—but Riku ran straight through the door that should have been impossible to open without one of those cards, and disappeared. "Riku!"

Sora flung himself against the door, fists first. There was no reply.

"Sora… Are you okay?" Goofy said anxiously from behind him as he kept pounding at the door.

"Don't worry about me. But Riku… What happened?" Sora turned then, all the strength gone out of him.

Jiminy Cricket hopped out of his pocket and looked up at him. "He sure was acting strangely. Almost as if someone was controlling him again…"

Those black clothes Riku wore—they were the same as when Ansem had controlled him.

"But we got rid of Ansem for good!" said Sora but hung his head again.

Had they *really* beaten Ansem once and for all? He couldn't even be sure about that much.

Goofy folded his arms. "Gawrsh, I wonder what's wrong with him. Did somethin' happen to Riku's heart?"

"*Wak!* Then what about the king?" said Donald with a jump. "He was supposed to be with Riku!"

When they'd closed the door to Kingdom Hearts, King Mickey had stayed with Riku. But if something strange had happened to Riku…did that mean the same thing could have happened to the king, too?

"We've got to go help him!" Donald blurted furiously, but Sora didn't move.

"…I guess so."

"Sora…," Goofy said, worrying.

Then Jiminy spoke up. "I know…you're thinking Riku isn't your friend, right? But that's just not true."

Oh… Riku said he never liked me, Sora thought. *Really? The whole time, even back on the islands? Why not?*

"He did say some awful things to you back there," Jiminy went on. "But you gotta remember…we are in Castle Oblivion. Folks lose their memories here a little bit at a time. Riku's probably forgotten that the two of you were such good friends, that's all."

Sora looked up finally. *Riku forgot? About me?*

"You really think he just forgot?"

If he just forgot that we were friends…if he only remembers the times when we fought, then maybe that's making him think that he doesn't like me.

Right after we were fighting, I would hate him, too. I would really think that I never wanted to talk to him again. But then, the very next day, I'd forget that I felt like that at all, and we'd go play together on our island again.

"That'd be my guess. But Sora… Instead of being sad, we have to figure out a way to help Riku get his memory back. No need to mope. If we all work together, why, we're sure to get you through it," Jiminy told him with a heartfelt smile. "That's more like you, isn't it?"

"Jiminy's right. You gotta let your friends help!" Goofy grinned.

Sora let out a tiny sigh and smiled a little bashfully. "…Yeah. Okay."

Donald flailed with his wand. "No, no, not like that! You have to be braver!"

"Huh? Oh, I get it…" Sora shrugged and brandished the Keyblade with a cocky grin. "I'll save them all! Naminé and Riku and King Mickey, too!"

Jiminy hopped up onto his shoulder. "There! That's the spirit."

“Heartless or whatever, I’ll take ’em on!”

“That’s our brave hero!” Jiminy cheered.

Sora laughed quietly.

“…That’s all it takes to get him smiling again,” Donald whispered into Goofy’s ear, smiling himself.

“Yep! That’s our Sora!”

“Did you say something, Goofy?” said Sora.

“Nope, not a thing! C’mon, let’s go! Riku and…and the king are waitin’ for us!”

Sora nodded and turned to the door again and raised the card to unlock it.

Humid salty air swirled around them.

“Where are we now…?” Sora looked around. The wooden construction felt familiar, but he couldn’t quite recall from where.

“The floor’s kinda unsteady.” Goofy’s nose twitched. “I can hear the ocean, too…”

The sound of waves was all around them. The moon hung in the dark night sky.

“I know! We’re on a ship!” blurted Donald. That certainly would explain the unsteady floor.

“Sora, do you remember comin’ here before…?” said Goofy.

Sora had to shake his head. *I don’t remember this place.* “What about you, Goofy?”

“I don’t remember it, either…” Goofy’s head drooped.

“Donald? Do you?” asked Sora.

“Nope…” Donald looked unhappy about it, too.

If this world really was made out of my memories, Sora thought, *then we must have been here before—but I don’t remember it at all.*

In Monstro, he’d at least had the vaguest sense of a memory, but here he didn’t even have that. And neither did the others. To think even Goofy didn’t remember a thing about this world…

Our memories really are disappearing, bit by bit.

“Well, the only thing to do is keep going!” said Donald, and Sora nodded.

Right… If we don’t keep going, we won’t find anything. I won’t find Riku again… And her… And King Mickey, too. They must be somewhere in this castle.

“I wonder if Riku’s on this here ship, too…,” said Goofy, looking a little distant.

“I don’t know… I guess we should look, anyway.” The moment Sora took a step, something shiny flew above his head and went in glittering spirals around them.

“*Wak!* What’s that?!” Donald stared up at the flittering light. It came to a stop in the midst of the trio and revealed itself as the tiny figure of a girl with translucent wings—a fairy.

“Who are you…?” Sora murmured.

“Maybe she’s here to help us,” said Jiminy, poking his head out of Sora’s pocket. The fairy, who was scarcely any bigger than the cricket, flew close to Jiminy and nodded emphatically.

“Looks like you’re right!” said Goofy.

She shot up high in the air again, then ahead as if to lead them somewhere.

“Let’s follow her!”

They began to, but then Heartless seemed to appear out of the air, jumping down to block their way.

“*Wak!* Should’ve known this would happen!” shouted Donald, gripping his wand. From beyond the cluster of Heartless, the fairy looked back at them anxiously.

“Don’t worry! We’ll keep up with ya, Tinker Bell!” Goofy called to her.

Sora turned. “Oh!”

“Hyuck?” Goofy cocked his head at the startled look on Sora’s face.

“You said her name!”

Goofy jumped.

“You’re Tinker Bell?” Sora shouted to her, and she spun around, twinkling brightly in reply.

“Anyway, let’s get rid of these Heartless! *Wak!*” yelled Donald, whacking a Heartless over the head.

“Oh, right! —Take *this*!” Sora brought the Keyblade down on another one.

So Goofy did remember the fairy’s name! Their memories weren’t completely gone. Just knowing that made Sora glad.

“All right! Here goes!” Swinging the Keyblade around him, he ran.

They went through a number of cabins and cargo holds, all very similar, and more of the same Heartless came out to plague them. Unable to say how far they’d gotten, they came to a stop.

“…Is it just me or are all these rooms starting to look the same?” Sora sighed and looked up at Tinker Bell, who flew around sparkling.

Goofy was looking up, too. “Maybe we’re just goin’ in circles?”

“Some help she was,” Donald grumbled, pointedly not looking at her. Tinker Bell darted right at his face and kicked him in the bill. “*Wak!*”

Holding his bruised bill, he glanced at her sidelong, as she hovered above them giggling.

“Gee, I think you mighta ruffled her feathers, Donald,” Goofy murmured, and then they heard a high, clear boy’s voice.

“Tink, what are you doing? You weren’t supposed to bring the pirates back with you!”

The boy wore all green, including his cap, and he flew, alighting in front of them.

“Who are you?!” demanded Sora. The trio stood with their weapons ready, on their guard.

The boy had his hand up in warning, too. “Stay back, pirates! Or this will be the last fight you pick!”

“Hey, what’s the big idea?! We’re not pirates!” Donald snapped, still holding his bill. “We’re only here because… Umm… Wait, how can we explain this, Sora?”

“Huh?” Sora turned from the boy back to Donald, scratching his head. “I don’t know! C’mon, Donald, don’t put me on the spot like that! …What do you think, Goofy?”

Goofy only cocked his head. “Gawrsh, beats me…”

The boy burst out laughing at them. “Okay, okay! I understand. Sora, Donald, and Goofy, right? I guess if you were real pirates, you wouldn’t get lost on your own ship. And you’re dressed funny, besides,” he concluded rather cheekily.

“That’s not very nice…,” Donald muttered.

“Wait, so if you thought we were pirates…then this must be a pirate ship!” said Sora.

“That’s right. You’re trapped inside the *Jolly Roger*—ship of the ol’ codfish, Captain Hook.” For some reason, as he said that name, the boy puffed his chest out.

“*Wak!* Well, if we’re trapped, that means you are, too!” Donald shook his wand. He just didn’t like this kid.

“Me? Don’t be silly. No one can capture Peter Pan!” He took a step toward them. “I’m just laying low until it’s time.”

“Time for what?” Goofy wondered.

“The pirates kidnapped my friend Wendy. She’s got to be somewhere on the

ship. I just didn't expect there to be so many pirates on watch. I sent Tink to look for a way around…but all she found was you."

Sora folded his arms, looking thoughtful.

"What is it?"

"I bet I know what she was thinking. If we all make a big enough racket, we can distract the pirates!" Sora replied, and Tinker Bell happily flew in circles around him.

"Gawrsh, you musta read her mind," said Goofy, watching her.

"So, how 'bout it? Let's work together, at least until we get back above deck." Sora held out his hand to Peter Pan.

"Okay, why not? Of course, I could save Wendy myself, if I wanted to. But you guys look like you'd be stuck without me!" As if he didn't know what a handshake was, the boy put his own hands behind his back and smirked.

Peter Pan was gliding through the air, smoothly avoiding the Heartless, while the trio struggled to follow.

"Hey, wait up! Peter Pan!" Donald yelled after him, out of breath.

"What's the matter?" He looped around and floated in front of Donald.

"We can't run that fast!"

"Well, you can fly!" said Peter Pan, as if it would be easier than walking.

"Er… How?"

"Like this!"

Peter Pan snapped his fingers and Tinker Bell flew in a spiral above Donald. Sparkling dust drifted down onto his head.

"There, now you can fly!"

"…Really?" Donald took a running start and leaped into the air…and fell on his face. "*Wak!* I can*not*!"

Tinker Bell looped above Donald, twinkling.

"Hmm…" Goofy cocked his head.

"What's the matter, Goofy?" asked Sora.

"Didn't this sorta thing happen before…?"

"…I don't really remember," Sora said miserably.

I can't remember coming to this world or even meeting Peter Pan. I forgot everything…

He stared at Donald trying to chase Tinker Bell. "There must be other important stuff I've forgotten…"

"But you do remember the important stuff," Goofy told him.

Which was easy enough to say, but Sora still felt terribly uneasy. “I’m not sure anymore…”

Riku and…that girl.

If my memories of being happy with them disappear, like Riku’s did, then I might hate Riku, too. When Sora thought of that it terrified him.

And she’s really important to me, too…but why do I get the feeling I’ve forgotten something even more important?

“Wak!”

Trying to get away from Donald, Tinker Bell had flown up to the ceiling, where boxes were piled high, and she paused there.

“What is it, Tink?” Peter Pan drifted up to the top of the stack of boxes. “Hey! Sora, there’s a trapdoor up here.”

To be sure, there was a small trapdoor in the ceiling.

“Gee, that’s funny…” Goofy clambered up the boxes to look at it.

“Well, let’s see what’s up there!” Sora climbed, too, and flung the trapdoor open.

“Peter? Peter Pan!”

A girl in a blue nightgown ran to him.

The room they had climbed up into was different from the ones before, a little more spacious.

“Hey, Wendy. Are you all right? I’ve come to rescue you with my three new Lost Boys!” Peter Pan grinned.

“Lost Boys?”

“Is that *us*?”

“Don’t you have *any* manners?!”

Goofy, Sora, and Donald all complained in turn, but Peter Pan didn’t even seem to hear. “C’mon, let’s get off this leaky ol’ tub and go exploring in Neverland! We’ll never grow up!”

He offered Wendy his hand, but she didn’t take it.

“Listen, Peter… I’ve got something to tell you,” she said, looking quite serious. “I want to go home to London.”

“What are you talking about? Why would you want to do that?” He glared at her.

“Hey, d’you know where London is?” Donald whispered.

“Nope! Never heard of it!” Goofy whispered back.

Peter Pan glanced at them and sounded more upset as he went on talking to

Wendy. “If you stay here, we can go on playing forever! But if you go back to London you’ll have to turn into a grown-up! And then you won’t be able to come to Neverland. We’ll never see each other again!”

He flew up in the air as he said that, looking down at her.

“I know, Peter. But…I still want to go home.” Wendy’s voice wavered like she was about to cry.

“I came to rescue you! And you don’t care if you never see me again!” He spun, turning his back on her.

“No! You don’t understand!”

“Suit yourself! And while you’re at it, rescue yourself! I’m leaving,” he snapped and flew back down through the trapdoor.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Sora ran to the hole in the floor and crouched down to poke his head through, but Peter Pan was already gone, shadow and all.

“And there he goes,” Donald fumed.

Beside him, Wendy disconsolately clasped her hands over her chest. “Peter…”

“Um… Hi. Nice to meet you, Wendy,” Sora said gingerly.

She looked at them, then, curious. “Who are you…?”

“We’re… Uh, how do I explain this?” He turned to the others.

“Maybe we can just be the Lost Boys for now?” Goofy murmured in his ear.

“We’re Peter Pan’s Lost Boys… Well, his friends,” Sora told her.

“Oh… But he’s left you behind,” Wendy said sadly.

“Yeah… What should we do?” Sora really didn’t know.

“I’ve got an idea!” Goofy exclaimed. “Why don’t we think of something out on deck?”

“That doesn’t make any sense…I think,” said Donald.

Sora looked up at Tinker Bell, who still hovered above them, glittering. “Well, there’s still trouble waiting outside. Wendy, you stay in here. We’ll find a way to get you out.”

“All right,” Wendy nodded. “Be careful.”

“Maybe if you stay here, Peter will change his mind and come back,” said Goofy, trying to be encouraging.

“C’mon, guys,” said Sora, and they went down through the trapdoor again, back into the storerooms. “How do we get out to the deck again, anyway?”

“Well, let’s just keep going!” Donald replied, swinging his wand. But before they could take another step, Heartless were blocking their path.

“You’re not stopping us!” Leading the charge, Sora swung the Keyblade at

them.

“Fira! Blizzara!” Donald hopped as he shouted spells. One by one the Heartless turned to light and then nothing.

“My turn!” Goofy knocked one aside with his shield.

“This sure would be easier if we could fly like Peter Pan…,” Sora mumbled. He used to wish that he could fly… But that was a silly dream, something only little kids thought of.

“I think I’ve been able to fly before,” said Goofy.

“Huh?” Sora turned even as he was still swinging at the last Heartless.

“It was just a dream, though.” Goofy put his shield away and looked off into space for a moment.

“Well, if we’re talking about dreams, then so have I!” Donald retorted.

“You too, Donald?” said Sora.

Donald waddled in a circle around Sora. “I was flying like this around a great big clock tower!”

“Gawrsh, isn’t that funny? I think I’ve had a dream about flying around a clock tower, too.” Goofy nodded at Donald and grinned.

They ran through more rooms and more, and at last they stood in the salty breeze again.

“Whew. We finally made it out!” Donald stretched, glad for the fresh air.

A furious shout rang out across the deck. “There you are, you rascals!”

The man they saw wore a big swashbuckler’s hat and a mustache.

“You think you can play stowaway on the ship of Captain Hook?!” He swaggered closer to them, brandishing the namesake hook he had in place of a left hand, and sneered. “Friends of Peter Pan, I’ll wager.”

“Are we his friends?” Donald murmured.

“Gee, he sure didn’t seem to think so,” Goofy replied.

Sora turned back to them, scowling. “Yeah, the way he took off like that! He even ditched Wendy.”

“I’m not finished talking yet! How dare you ignore me and plot behind my back!” Hook ranted, drawing his sword. “Uncivilized brats! You’re in cahoots with Peter Pan, and no mistake!”

“If you say so.” Sora faced him with the Keyblade ready. “But either way, you’re gonna let us off this ship.”

“Ha! I wouldn’t be so sure, if I were you!” The pirate captain gestured with his hook toward the edge of the deck, where a plank stretched out over the water.

And standing on it was…

"Wendy!" cried Sora.

Apparently Hook had gotten her in his clutches while they made their way up to the deck. "Any trouble and dear Wendy goes for a stroll—off the plank!"

"You wouldn't!" Donald covered his face.

"Believe me, I'd rather not. After all, I need Wendy to bait that blasted Peter Pan!" Hook smirked and patted Wendy's cheek.

The boyish voice replied from above him. "Then, I'll just have to take the bait, you old codfish!"

As light as the wind, Peter Pan swooped down at Hook's head.

"Peter!" Wendy reached for him.

"Here I am, Hook! Miss me?"

"Insolent brat! This is the day you pay for taking me hand!" Hook lunged for Peter Pan with his sword.

"Uh-oh!" The boy nimbly evaded, and in the same movement, he scooped Wendy up in his arms and flew high into the air.

"Augh— *Wh-wh-wh-waugh!*" Hook flailed in alarm as momentum nearly took him right off the plank himself and finally regained his balance. "You've made a fool of me for the last time, Pan! I'll cleave you to the brisket!"

Red-faced with rage, he went first for Sora, who at least wasn't in the air.

"Ack!" Sora barely managed to dodge.

"Why you— *Thundara!*" Donald waved his wand and a bolt of lightning struck Hook's sword.

He snarled in frustration.

"Ha-ha! Up here, Hook!" Still holding Wendy, Peter Pan flew in circles above the captain.

"Here, you scallywag!" Hook swung his sword over his head, making his footing unsteady again.

"Hey! Over here, Hook!" Sora called, copying Peter Pan and running to the edge of the ship.

"Why, you rotten mongrels!" Hook roared and made a thrust at Sora, who easily jumped out of the way. And then, it turned out, Hook had no more deck beneath his feet. *"Aaaaaaaugh!"*

There was a terrific splash.

"Whew… Thanks, Peter Pan, we owe you one." Sora lowered the Keyblade, looking up at the flying boy.

"Well, at first I thought I'd let you handle it, but it looked like you were in a

tight spot, after all. Hey, you three did pretty good, though!" He alighted on the deck. Wendy was still in his arms.

"Thank you, Peter," she said.

After a pause, he looked at her. "About London… Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

"Peter, I'm sorry. But I really do want to go home," she replied, resolute, and stood on her own.

"I was afraid of that… Everyone grows up, and grown-ups always forget. First, you'll forget what it feels like to be young, and then you'll forget about me…," Peter Pan said glumly.

"How can you say such a thing, Peter? I'll never, ever forget you." As she spoke Tinker Bell left glittering trails above her head.

"Sure, that's what you think now." He turned away from Wendy and went on with sadness slowing his words. "But when you try to remember me, the memories will be gone. You'll forget… Little by little, one memory at a time… And once you're grown up, there won't be a single memory of Neverland left."

Memories forgotten, little by little…

"Don't say that," Sora blurted.

Peter Pan turned to him.

"Memories don't always come back to us whenever we want them to—even the important ones," said Sora. "But that doesn't mean they're gone. It's more like…like they're sleeping. When the right thing comes along and wakes the memory up, we can remember it. The memories engraved in our hearts never go away. I'm sure of it!"

Wendy nodded. "He's right, Peter."

"Never, huh…? It's funny. I thought everybody who left Neverland just forgot all about it…" Then, Peter Pan smiled. "But I have a feeling you guys just might be different."

He picked up Wendy again. "Oh!" she squeaked in surprise.

"Okay, Sora. If you say we'll meet again, then I believe you!" And with that he took off.

"Peter…"

"Let's go, Wendy. London is waiting," he said, sounding thoughtful—almost in a grown-up way.

"Oh, thank you, Peter."

He nodded and turned to Sora a last time. "Good-bye, Sora. I'll be waiting to see what you look like all grown up!" Then, he flew up and away into the night

sky. Tinker Bell followed, her twinkling glow passing over the faces of the trio.

"So our memories haven't gone anywhere, after all," said Goofy.

"'Course they haven't!" Sora grinned. "And Riku's gonna remember, too!"

"Then, let's get going!" Donald jumped with impatience.

"Yeah. Riku's gotta be up ahead somewhere!" Sora went for a door that stood unnaturally in the corner of the deck, looking like it couldn't lead to anything. And they went through.

Another marble hall—a very familiar sight by now. And Riku was standing there.

"Can't you take a hint, Sora? I told you to go home."

"Not till I rescue you and Naminé!" Sora retorted with a tiny smile at the corners of his mouth.

"I don't remember ever asking you to rescue me," Riku said coldly.

"But Kairi's waiting for you to come home!" Goofy exclaimed.

"Kairi…" Riku and Sora both murmured the name almost exactly in sync.

I forgot about Kairi, thought Sora. *I promised her that I'd find Riku and go home…*

"That's right! Kairi's waiting," Sora echoed.

Riku snorted. "You're the one who forgot. I told you, when we closed the door to Kingdom Hearts…'Take care of Kairi.'"

He did tell me that. And instead I went on a journey searching for him and King Mickey… But how could I go back to our islands without Riku? We have to be together. I want all three of us running up the beach…

Three—? Sora's thoughts tripped there.

What about Naminé? Me and Riku and Naminé and Kairi—doesn't that make four?

But there were always three of us, running up the beach together. Why do I remember three…? Weren't there four…?

Or did Naminé leave before Kairi came…?

No…that's not right.

Then when was Naminé there…? And Kairi?

"Give it up," said Riku. "I'm not going back to the islands. Not for anything."

"It's not just for Kairi! What about all our other friends?!" Sora said it more to convince himself—to hold on to his memories.

"You can have those losers. I already forgot 'em."

"Hey! That's enough!"

“What about you, Sora? Do you actually remember what they all look like? Their voices?”

“Of course I remem—”

Sora broke off and hung his head. He couldn’t remember.

White sand, blue sea. Green trees. Riku and Naminé…

He really couldn’t remember any more than that.

Naminé—no, and Kairi, too.

Who was it we played with on that beach? Why can’t I remember it right?

“Don’t feel bad. That’s what this castle does to you after a while.” Riku smirked. “It’s great. You forget all the useless stuff and remember for the first time what really matters. And I remembered, Sora. Now I know the one thing that’s the most important to me.”

“*Useless* stuff?!” cried Sora.

The memories he was losing weren’t useless. They couldn’t be.

Even if he remembered something else important, that didn’t make the other things worth any less. Sora knew that had to be wrong.

“I’m going to stay here and protect Naminé,” said Riku. “Nothing else matters.”

Sora stared at him and slowly, with a smile, took a fighting stance with the Keyblade. “Hey, Riku… I think I’ll jog your memory.”

“You can try.” He readied his sword, too.

“Donald, Goofy…!” Sora called.

“*Wak!* Okay, we get it!” The other two backed up to the wall to stay out of the way.

“Just between us, huh?” Riku taunted.

“That’s right. One-on-one!” Sora took a flying leap and brought the Keyblade down. He felt the impact all the way to his shoulders. “Don’t you remember, Riku? We were always fighting like this on the beach!”

“*Hmph.* I remember you losing!” Riku pushed the Keyblade away and countered.

Sora blocked it. “Then, you can remember…more than that!”

I won’t forget. I’ll never forget what’s really important…!

He swung, and with a clang, Riku’s sword went spinning through the air.

“Rgh…” Riku fell to one knee.

“Riku…”

“Too bad, Sora. I’m not remembering a thing.” Wavering, he stood up again. “But we can keep fighting if you want.”

Sora stepped closer to him and held out a hand. “C’mon, Riku… Never mind fighting. Let’s go help Naminé.”

“Together…?” Riku shoved his hand aside. “Yeah, right. That’s just like you—always barging in on my heart!”

“What’s *that* mean?!” Sora demanded.

Riku tossed his silver hair and frowned. “*Hmph*. You forgot that, too? You never cared. It never mattered to you!”

He turned away and ran up the stairs through the next door.

“Riku—!” Sora yelled but gave up on chasing him and only stared at his feet.

Barging in on his heart…? What does that even mean? When have I ever done something like that to Riku?

Did I…hurt him somehow?

“Sora…” Goofy walked over to him, concerned.

“You okay?” Donald peered into his face, too.

“Yeah… I’m fine.” Sora smiled at them. “Let’s go. We have to get Riku’s memories back!”

“Right!” Donald and Goofy nodded.

…No matter what, I’ll save you, Riku.

(To be continued)

“You have my sympathies. From the heart.”

“But don’t waste your time. We Nobodies can never hope to be somebodies.”

“Say, Naminé. Isn’t there something else you can do?”

SORA'S STORY
PART 2

SORA'S STORY
PART 2

Is this okay?
Was it okay?

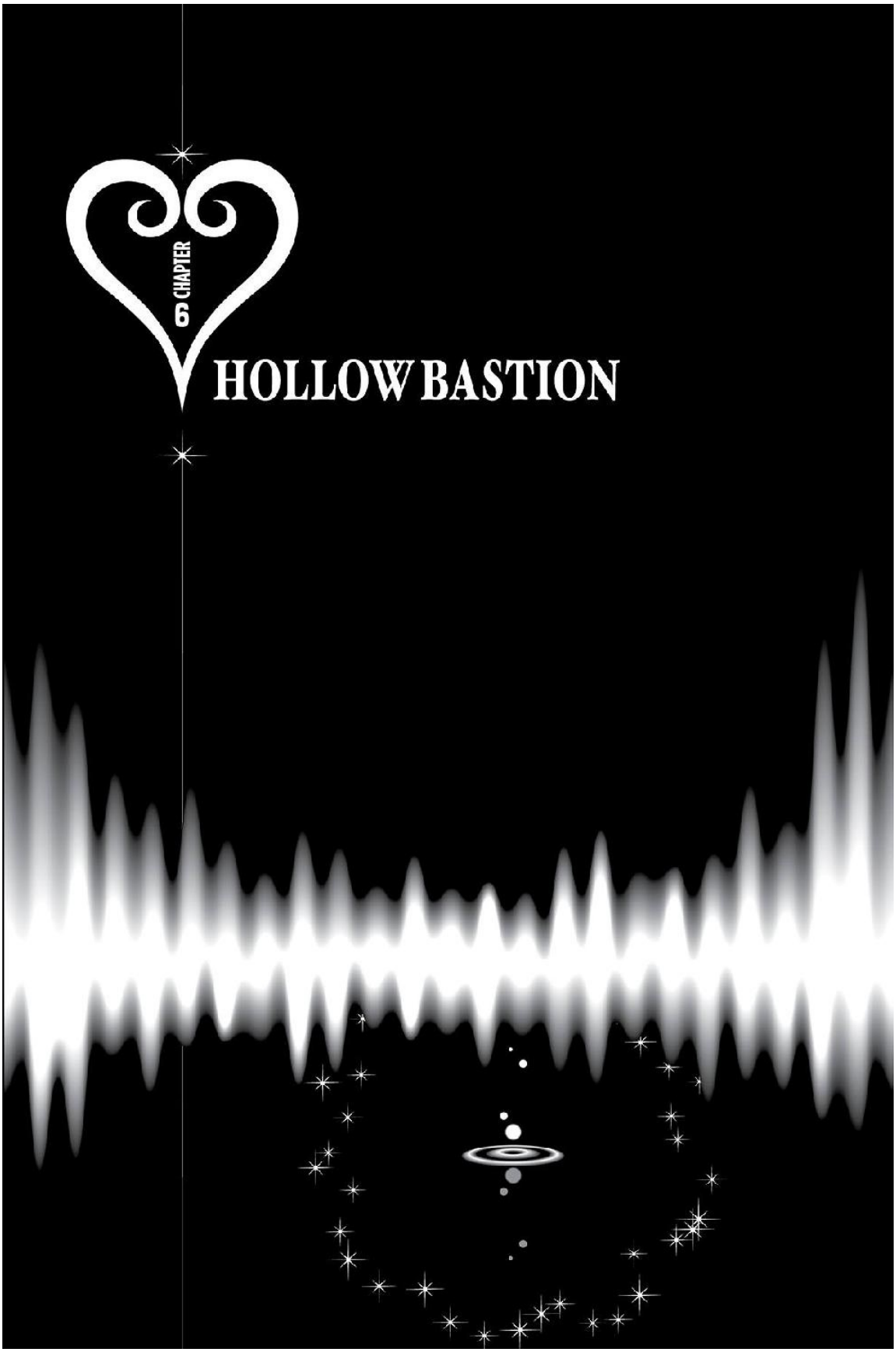
Sora… I'm sorry.

In a small room in the castle, she clutched a sketchbook, gazing at the images in the big crystal ball.
Axel slowly moved to her side. "You have my sympathies. From the heart."
She looked up and glared straight at him.
For a moment, Axel felt like those deep blue eyes might swallow him up and drown him. He blinked. "But don't waste your time. We Nobodies can never hope to be somebodies."
Her gaze fell into her lap. With a slight smile playing at his lips, Axel stared at her.
She held the key to everything…
"Say, Naminé. Isn't there something else you can do?"
It was a risky move, trying to push her to action.
Naminé didn't look at him again or even move.

We Nobodies… And the irreplaceable you.
How much of it is lies, and how much is true? I'm not even sure anymore myself.

Is this okay?
Was it okay?

Hey, Sora… What are you thinking right now?


CHAPTER 6
HOLLOW BASTION

CHAPTER 6

HOLLOW BASTION

AS HE BEGAN TO HOLD UP THE CARD IN FRONT OF THE DOOR, Sora paused.

"Sora?" Goofy looked at him anxiously.

"C'mon. We've gotta keep up with Riku!" said Donald.

Sora bit his lip for just an instant before he spoke. "I don't get it. Riku and I both want the same thing—we both want to help Naminé. How come we're fighting? I mean, we've argued about stuff since forever, but…"

We've fought a million times and made up a million times… Because we were best friends, weren't we?

"Could be 'cos ya care what happens to each other," Goofy said, trying to help.

"Yeah, I really thought so, too." Sora looked down. "But…maybe Riku doesn't."

I haven't lost all my memories. I still have the important ones, he thought. *But if Riku only remembers us fighting…does that mean those times were more important to him than when we played together?*

"Aw, you can't give up! You're friends tied together! Sora and Riku and Ka… Gee, what was her name?" Goofy cocked his head, thinking.

Jiminy jumped out of Sora's pocket. "Hm… It seems our memories are fading mighty fast. Sora, we've got to hurry. I'm sure Riku will come around if you just talk to him."

"Yeah, you're right," said Sora. "The three of us were never apart! Me and Riku… And Naminé."

We were always together. Me and Riku and Naminé playing together on the island.

And someday the three of us will run down the beach again… So I have to talk to Riku.

I have to save him.

I'll find Riku and talk to him before he loses hold of his most precious memories…

"C'mon, guys!" Sora looked at the card in his hand. It had a picture of a castle he'd never seen before. Or he couldn't remember it…but that was all right.

I've got my friends… I have Riku and Naminé.

Sora held the card up high.

Through the door was a place like a great hall, embellished with a rose emblem on the floor.

"We've been to *this* castle before!" said Donald, glancing all around.

The windows were all stained glass, and the light shone faintly through.

Goofy's ears perked up. "I can hear somebody…"

Sora began to move in the direction of the voices. A beautiful woman in a gold dress stood there, looking upset.

"Is she all alone?" Donald wondered.

Then a huge furry monster came up behind her.

"Is—is it a Heartless?!" Goofy held out his shield.

"I don't think so," said Sora. "He has a face and everything…"

"Actually, from his eyes, he looks nice," Donald added.

"Well, let's try talking to him!"

Sora was about to go closer, but Jiminy Cricket jumped out of his pocket. "*Ssh!* I think something's wrong," he warned them, and the trio stopped.

Past them, the creature and the beautiful lady seemed to be arguing about something.

"But, Belle, I don't understand!" he was pleading. "I came to rescue you from Maleficent!"

Belle didn't turn to face him, and her voice was cold. "Beast… I did not ask you to come. And it doesn't matter, anyway. I'm not going back with you. I'm staying."

With that, she began to stalk away.

"Belle? Do you know what you're saying? How can you stay in this castle with that witch?"

She turned, then, just glancing at the Beast. "I've nothing more to say," she told him sharply. "Now please leave before she finds you." And she left the hall.

"But why…? Belle…" The Beast helplessly looked up at the high ceiling.

Sora went to him and said quietly, "I'm not sure what's going on, but…is everything okay?"

He seemed very familiar—and he was kindhearted, Sora was sure of that. It hurt to see him looking so sad.

Donald came closer, too. “Don’t feel bad. There must be a reason she said those things.”

“Keep your sympathy,” he growled. “No one could ever care for a beast like me.”

He went after Belle.

“…Gawrsh, I sure wish there were somethin’ we could do for him,” Goofy said softly, watching him leave.

“Well, there’s gotta be a reason!” Donald looked up at Sora.

“Are you saying we should help them, Donald?”

“Obviously!” Donald grinned.

Sora folded his arms and smiled, too. “We ought to keep going, but…”

“*We can’t just leave ’*em, can we?” Goofy finished for him.

“Let’s go find Belle, then,” Sora decided and started toward where she and the Beast had gone. “Besides…those two are probably our friends, I bet.”

“Gee, what makes ya say that?” said Goofy, close behind him. “I don’t remember ’em at all.”

Puzzled, Donald looked at Goofy.

“Y’know, all these worlds are made out of Sora’s memories, after all,” Goofy went on. “And I’ve got a feeling the Beast helped us out big-time somewhere along the line.”

Sora looked back at him and said brightly, “Yeah, I’ve got that feeling, too.”

“All right, it’s our turn to help him out! Let’s go!” Donald ran ahead—only to run into some Heartless.

“Aw, nobody’s looking for *you*!” He jumped up and waved his wand. *“Blizzaga!”*

“*Ahyuck!* But we’re a lot stronger now!” said Goofy, moving to back up Donald.

“Yeah—way better than when we first got here!” Sora swung his Keyblade.

When they’d first walked into Castle Oblivion, they had no idea how they would manage… But now they could see how far they’d come. All the strength they’d lost—they had reclaimed it.

So maybe…maybe, they could reclaim the memories they had lost, too.

And we’ll get Riku’s memories back.

“Yaaargh!” The Keyblade in Sora’s hands glowed faintly as he defeated the Heartless.

They tried to head deeper into the castle, fighting off the Heartless that appeared as they went. Atop the staircase that wound up to the side of the hall, they came to a small door.

“There’s somethin’ funny about this…” Goofy reached for the door with his shield ready in his other hand.

“Here we come!” Donald ran in with his wand held high.

“Oh, my!”

Instead of more Heartless, they met the lady they were looking for—Belle. She was surrounded by bookcases. The room could only be a library.

“Who are you?” she asked, not unkindly. “Did Maleficent kidnap you, too?”

“Um… Not exactly. It’s a long story.” Sora scratched his head, a bit at a loss, but then he heard what she’d actually said. “Wait! Us, *too*? You mean you were kidnapped?”

Belle’s sweet, serene expression clouded over. “Yes. That witch forced me to come here… And I’ve been trapped ever since.” She turned away from them. Maybe she didn’t want them to see her holding back tears. “I have no one to talk to. Books are all I have to ease my loneliness. I’ve missed him so much…”

“You mean, the Beast?” Goofy said cautiously. “Then, why were you so mean to him back there?”

She looked at him and replied frankly, “You don’t understand. I *can’t* let him see how I really feel.”

“Why not?!” Sora blurted. “He looked really hurt!”

Belle looked down, biting her lip, and spoke after another moment. “It’s just that—” Then she suddenly glanced up. “Oh no, she’s coming! Hide quickly!”

“Huh?”

“*Hyuck?* What’s goin’ on?”

“Wak?”

She looked so alarmed that the trio began to panic.

“There’s no time to explain,” she told them. “Hide! Now!”

Sora huddled under a desk, and Goofy jumped behind some curtains, but Donald couldn’t find a good hiding place and only ran in circles. *“Wak! Quack! Wawawawaaak!”*

“Hurry!” Belle whispered, and just as Donald finally squeezed himself in between some bookcases, a door opened.

A woman in black and purple robes strode into the library.

“Oh… Hello, Maleficent.” Belle smiled at her. “To what do I owe this visit?”

“He was here, yes?” Maleficent said sharply. “He risked his life to come and

save you. Why do you reject him?”

She took a step closer to Belle, looming over her.

“I won’t ask for his help.”

Maleficent peered closely at Belle. “Oh? And why is that?”

“You know very well why,” said Belle, nearly shouting at her. “I’m not going to fall into your trap!”

Maleficent gave her a cruel smirk. “Then, I suppose I have no choice but to make you *beg* for his help!”

With a wave of the staff in her hand, Maleficent and Belle vanished into thin air.

“Belle?!” Sora and the others jumped out of their hiding places, but there wasn’t a trace of her.

“What do we do, Sora?!” Donald looked up at him, flailing.

“Help her, of course!” Sora replied. “What else?”

Donald and Goofy nodded to him, and they dashed out of the library.

They ran through chamber after chamber and came at last to a soaring chapel, where they found Maleficent and Belle facing each other.

“What are you waiting for?” Maleficent taunted. “Call to him!”

“No! I won’t let you hurt him!”

At Belle’s refusal, she raised her staff. “Then, I shall make you scream! And the fool will come running the moment he hears your cries.”

As she was about to swing it, and no doubt release some terrible magic, the trio ran to stand in front of Belle. “Enough!” Sora shouted.

“Oh…?” Maleficent raised her eyebrows at the sudden intruders.

Sora held the Keyblade ready. “The Beast isn’t the only one you have to deal with.”

“Begone, boy. You have no business here. Unless, of course, you wish to join in the screaming. Perfect! Shrieks of terror, ringing out in chorus—what better way to draw that brute to me!”

Maleficent stared down at him, and Sora glared back.

Then a growling voice came from behind Belle. “Don’t trouble yourself.”

“Beast!” Belle whipped around to see him there, and he began to stalk closer, but she stopped him. “No! You mustn’t! I told you to leave this place. Leave me alone! I never want to see your face again!”

And she turned her back on him again.

“Belle…” He grimaced as if in physical pain.

But from where Sora and the others were standing, they could see Belle's face contorted in sadness, too.

"All right," said the Beast, sounding resigned. "If that's how you feel…I understand."

"But that's—*mmfff* !" Sora started, and Goofy clamped a hand over his mouth. He wriggled free. "Hey, what was that for?!"

"Just let 'em be…," Goofy whispered to him.

The Beast spoke slowly. "My hideous form is punishment for being a selfish prince, unable to love. I was made into a monster, loved by no one…and I only became more selfish. Until I met you, Belle." A soft smile came to his frightening face. "You are the only one who accepted me. Little by little you warmed my cold, twisted heart. The memories of our days together are the most precious to me."

Belle turned to him again, looking as if she might cry.

"So, I'm sorry, but I can't leave you here…even if you hate me for it. Consider this my final selfish act!"

"Oh no… Beast…!"

Behind her, Maleficent let out a terrible cackle. "Well, well. I never dreamed such ugliness could hide so beautiful a heart! This calls for a change of plan. Beast, I shall claim your heart instead of Belle's!"

She swung her staff.

"Look out!" called Sora, but the Beast didn't move an inch.

Purplish light blasted from Maleficent's staff, a beam heading straight for the Beast.

"No! Please!" Belle jumped in front of him to take it. "Oh—?!"

"Belle!"

Struck by the purple light, Belle collapsed unconscious into the Beast's arms. A heart, glowing beautifully, rose from her chest.

"Hm, so much for the change of plan. Belle's heart it is, after all. It seems her cold words spoke little of her true feelings!" The heart floated up over Maleficent's head. "Ha-ha! She loves you, Beast. I can feel it shining in her heart!"

"You fiend! Give her heart back!" The Beast lunged to attack Maleficent, but darkness covered the chapel, and then she was gone.

"Where are you?!" he roared.

"She went that way! Where the shadows fled!" Sora grabbed the Beast's paw and ran toward the door at the side of the chapel.

“Who are you…? What are you doing here?” the Beast asked.

“No time to talk! We better go after her now!” Donald said, coming up behind him.

“You would help me?”

“You bet!” Goofy added at Donald’s side. “After what you were sayin’, well, we just gotta!”

“Let’s go get Belle’s heart back!” said Sora.

“Right.” The Beast nodded, and his anguished look eased into determination.

Through the corridor that extended from the chapel, there was another huge room with a rose emblem on the floor, like the hall they’d first come into.

And there, in the middle of this room, Maleficent stood awaiting them.

“Why, you’ve done well to make it this far,” she said with a menacing sneer.

“Give her back!” shouted Sora.

Maleficent laughed. “As your reward, Beast, I’ll tell you why she rejected you. My dark magic requires hearts of utmost beauty. And Belle was perfect. Deep in her heart, her love for you shone with an uncommon radiance.” She turned away from them. “But she guessed my plans… By denying her love for you, she put her heart beyond my reach.”

“But she saved me—she protected me… So that’s it. I’ve heard enough. Release her heart now, Maleficent. If you don’t…”

She chuckled softly.

“Is something funny?” The Beast fixed her with a furious stare.

“Don’t you realize why I’m telling you all this? Did you think it was out of kindness? No—I did it to erase your doubts. Now your heart is beginning to shine with love for Belle. A beautiful heart—that is, a heart useful to me. So I shall have yours, too, monster!” With a sweep of her staff, green flames rose from the floor to surround the Beast.

“That is not to be!” he snarled.

“You dare to challenge me?! Pitiful fool!” The floor rumbled and more flames poured up from it.

“You’re up against us, too!” Sora raised the Keyblade, preparing to strike.

“That’s right!”

“All of us!”

Donald and Goofy jumped in.

“Then your hearts will be mine as well!” Maleficent grew and transformed into a jet-black dragon to breathe fire at them.

“Whoa!” Sora barely evaded the flames and rolled into a corner.

The Beast let out a ferocious roar and charged at the dragon.

“We’ve got her!” Sora, Donald, and Goofy exchanged glances and all jumped at Maleficent’s clawed feet.

“Sora!” Goofy stretched out his hands, and Sora used the leverage to spring up higher. Then he brought the Keyblade down on Maleficent’s head, as the Beast dealt a heavy blow to her jaw. The dragon opened her mouth wide and roared in pain.

“Gotcha!” Donald pounced up on Goofy’s back and bounded off his head to explode with his magic. *“Blizzaga!”*

Chunks of ice went straight down the dragon’s throat. She flailed her head madly, and without losing a moment, the Beast slammed into her, roaring.

While her head was lowered Sora struck with his Keyblade again. The dragon writhed horribly and then was still.

“We did it!” Sora ran to the Beast’s side as Maleficent’s dragon body turned to light and disappeared.

Left behind was a heart, shining like starlight.

“Belle’s heart!” Sora and the Beast, then Donald and Goofy, all gathered around it. The heart glowed more brightly and took shape again as Belle.

The Beast called her name and embraced her.

“Please forgive me… I had to be so cruel to you. But no matter how I tried, I couldn’t hide my own feelings…” Belle pressed her face to his powerful chest.

“I’m the one who should apologize,” the Beast rumbled. “For doubting you. I never want to remember feeling that way…so angry, so alone.”

“Then don’t. We’ll leave behind the sad memories and make happier ones. Starting right now.”

“Belle…” They held each other tightly.

“*Ahyuck!* There they go with the mushy stuff,” Goofy whispered to Sora.

“Yeah. Looks like it’s time we were on our way…”

“Good idea. Let’s get out of their hair!” Donald started walking. There was a little door up ahead.

“But…” Sora looked back at Belle and the Beast.

“What is it, Sora?” asked Goofy.

“Nothing.” He smiled and followed Donald.

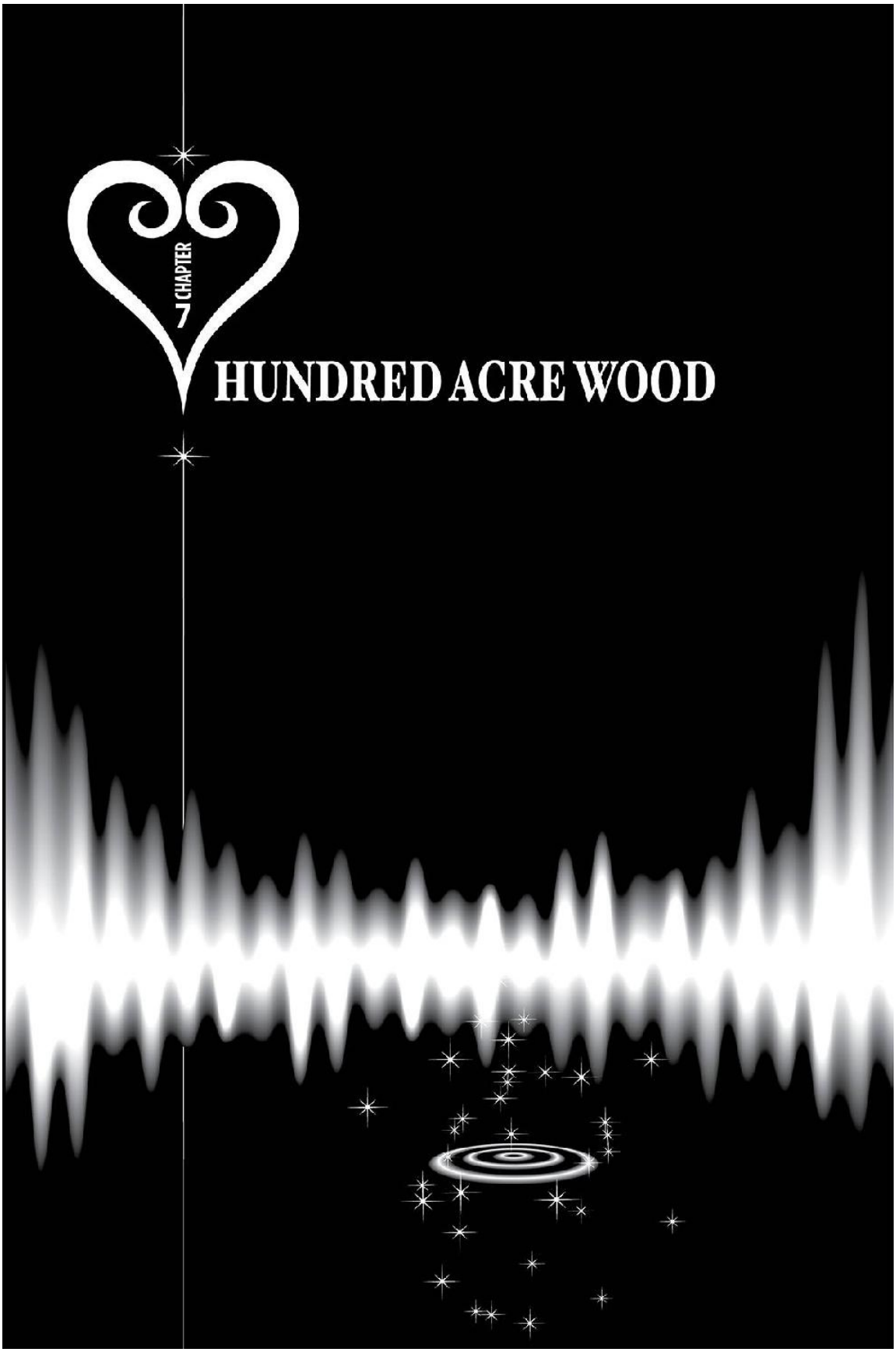
Belle said to leave behind the sad memories, but… Is that really okay?

Is it okay to forget things…?

Maybe we lose the sad memories first. Is that why I forgot about Naminé?

Then why did Riku forget about me? …Because he really never liked me after all?

Sora’s smile was gone. As they went through the door, his face was drawn tight with painful thoughts.


CHAPTER
HUNDRED ACRE WOOD

CHAPTER 7

HUNDRED ACRE WOOD

Something I can do…?
Can I do anything for Sora?
Something I can do for Sora, even though I'm nobody, and I can never become somebody…

Hey, Sora.
What should I do?

I don't know.
Because I don't have anything that's special to me…

SORA, DONALD, AND GOOFY STEPPED INTO ANOTHER of Castle Oblivion's white halls.

What'll I do if I see Riku? Sora thought. *What can I say to him?*

How can I get him to reclaim the memories he lost?

"Looks like nobody's here," said Donald, glancing this way and that. The marble halls felt terribly deserted.

Riku wasn't here.

Donald looked up at Sora with concern. "I kinda thought Riku would be waiting for us…"

"Gawrsh, it doesn't look like he's here. Maybe he doesn't feel like fightin' with ya any more after all?" Goofy, too, seemed anxious on Sora's behalf.

"I sure hope so," Sora sighed as if to himself, his eyebrows drawn.

The big crystal ball showed an image of the trio.

"So what's going on, Vexen? I thought Riku was under your control—so where is he?" Larxene arched her finely shaped eyebrows and stared expectantly at Vexen.

Beside her, Axel smirked. The color drained from Vexen's face—what little there was to begin with.

"He's hiding somewhere to lure Sora deeper into the castle, right?" Axel said to Larxene, and then turned to Vexen. "I suppose we should just leave it at that."

Riku's unexpected behavior wasn't such a bad thing for them—rather the contrary, in fact.

But there was another matter…

"Aha! Oh, I see now! I *never* would have guessed," Larxene giggled with a theatrically clueless shrug.

But she…she and the others haven't realized what's happening in this castle now—what's about to happen.

She went on taunting him. "I'm *so* sorry. It's just hard to tell whether your research is supposed to be of any use whatsoever."

Vexen began to tremble with rage. "Silence!"

"Aw, you hate being told the truth, don't you? Simpleminded for a scientist!"

"As if *you're* one to talk…" He glared at her with his fists clenched.

"That's enough." Another man stepped in to interrupt them. The hood of his black cloak covered his face.

"Marluxia!" Vexen exclaimed.

The man slowly pushed back his hood, revealing the pale pink hair that grew

to his shoulders and deep-set narrow eyes with a cold glint. “Vexen, the fact is that your project was a failure,” he said icily with a faint, threatening smile. “You had better not disappoint us again.”

The smile grated on Vexen’s nerves. He stalked up to Marluxia.

“Disappoint *you*?!” he spat. “You go too far! In this organization, you are number eleven! While *I* am number four, and I will not be ordered around by the likes of you!”

“This castle and Naminé have been entrusted to me,” Marluxia told him, unmoved. “Defying me will be seen as treason against the organization.”

“And traitors are eliminated,” said Larxene, grinning as if she couldn’t wait to see it happen. “That’s what the rules say!”

“I tell you, the project failed,” Marluxia repeated. “And I must report that failure to our leader.”

Vexen went pale again upon hearing the word *leader*.

“What— no, wait! Don’t tell him that!” He sounded as if he might fall to his knees and beg.

Seeing him like that, Marluxia made a small, cruel smirk. “Perhaps we can work something out.”

“How?” Vexen looked up.

“Eliminate Sora yourself.”

“What?!” He stared, round-eyed, and so did Larxene and Axel.

“Is there a problem?” said Marluxia with a smile so cold it was elegant.

“No… It’s just, why…,” Vexen floundered. “Won’t that *cause* a problem?”

“Never you mind.”

After Marluxia’s curt reply, silence filled the strained atmosphere until Larxene broke it. “Are you for real?”

Marluxia didn’t answer, and then Vexen vanished from the room without another word.

“You give a challenge like that to Vexen, and he’ll seriously try to eliminate Sora,” said Axel, not to place any blame, but as a statement of fact.

“That would be an unfortunate denouement.” Marluxia turned away and strode toward the corner, where a girl sat alone—Naminé.

“What will you do?” he asked her. “Before long, your hero will be wiped from existence. But I believe there is a certain promise that he made you. Isn’t that right, Naminé?”

“Yes…,” said Naminé in a thin, tiny voice.

Donald waddled through the hall, up the stairs to the next door. Behind him, Goofy paused for a moment to look back at Sora, and worry came into his face.

Donald turned, too. “What floor are we on now? We must’ve come pretty far up!”

Seeing that they were both worried about him, Sora felt less certain about what he should do.

Riku…and Naminé. I want to help both of them, and they’re both here in this castle.

And it’s possible that they both hate me.

He took a huge breath and sighed.

“Sora!” Jiminy Cricket hopped out of his pocket. “We must’ve lost quite a lot of memories by now. But it’s still not too late. Don’t you think we ought to turn back?”

Instead of meeting Jiminy’s gaze, Sora looked up at the ceiling. Leave Riku? And Naminé? How could he?

“I can’t do that. I’d be breaking a promise I made a long time ago.”

Right. I made a promise to Naminé.

“A promise? What would that be?” Jiminy asked.

Sora knew he’d made that promise—he had. “I promised Naminé when we were little—that I’d keep her safe, no matter what. But I forgot it… I didn’t remember until I started forgetting everything else!”

When was it? he thought. *I promised her…standing on the white sand.*

But what did I have to keep Naminé safe from?

Was Riku there, too?

It was such a vague memory…hazy, barely there. He was only sure of one part—

“I know you will!”

Their joined hands pulled apart. The worlds crumbling. The rain of light falling. So many, many shooting stars.

I know I made a promise to her. That I’d keep her safe no matter what.

“That’s why I can’t leave,” he said. “Now that I remember the promise, I have to keep it.”

“Of course.” Jiminy gave him a kind smile. “We understand, Sora.”

“You gotta keep your promises!” Goofy agreed.

“So I’ll keep going,” said Sora. “Will you guys come with me?”

Donald jumped at him. “*Wak!* What kinda question is that?!”

We won’t turn back, Sora told himself. *Even if I lose my memories, I’ll still*

save Naminé.

Feeling gladder, he nodded to them. “Thanks, everyone.”

“Aw, don’t be so stuffy,” Donald scolded, embarrassed, and turned away in a huff.

“Yeah! *Ahyuck.* All for one and one for all!” Goofy added.

Jiminy Cricket nodded. “Right. Your friends won’t let you go on alone!”

“Well, let’s get going!” said Donald.

Sora ran for the door to the next floor.

“Say, how many cards do you have left, anyway?” Donald asked.

“Just this one.”

Donald and Goofy peered at the card in Sora’s hand.

He stared at it, too, puzzled. “Huh. What’s this picture of?”

The card showed an old, shelf-worn book, one he couldn’t remember ever seeing before.

“Have we been to a world…that has anything to do with that?” Donald wondered.

“Gawrsh, we didn’t remember the world we were just in, too,” said Goofy, shrugging. “So maybe we forgot?”

“Well, let’s go see if we remember!” Sora held up the card.

Bright springtime sunlight warmed his face. Nearby was a forest teeming with flowers.

“Huh? Donald! Goofy!” Sora looked around, but the other two were nowhere to be seen. He lightly patted his pocket—Jiminy Cricket was gone, too.

“Where am I…?” Glancing side to side in search of the others, he spied someone else—a stout little bear, wearing a red sweater over his yellow fur, more like a plush toy than a real animal. But he seemed confused.

“What’s wrong, little fella?” asked Sora.

The little bear looked up, not in much of a hurry. He was rather mellow for a bear. “I’m looking for my friends.”

“Are they around here?” Sora didn’t see anyone—not his friends or anyone who might be the bear’s friends, either. “It looks like nobody’s here.”

“Oh. Then, perhaps I’m looking for nobody.”

“You’re looking for nobody…?” *What could that mean?*

“I suppose I must be. But they don’t seem to be anywhere.” The bear sat down on the spot and stared absently up at the sky. “And all this searching is making my tummy rumble. I wonder if there’s any honey about… Oh, but if I

stop to eat, I shall first have to stop searching…” He tapped his head.

“Why don’t we look for your friends together?” said Sora.

“For nobody, you mean?” The bear deliberately got to his feet again.

“No, no. For your friends. They might be around here. Let’s find them together.”

And we might find Donald and Goofy, too, Sora thought. *Anyway, I can’t just ignore someone else saying he’s looking for his friends.*

“Are you looking for my friends too?” said the bear.

Sora smiled at him. “No, but I’m looking for some friends of my own.”

“Oh… Are they also friends of Pooh? Even though I am Pooh, and you are not.”

“You’re Pooh, and I’m Sora. I don’t think our friends are the same friends. But I do know what it’s like to miss them. So why don’t we look together?”

“I’d like that, Sora.” Pooh smiled brightly with his wide mouth and started walking.

The forest was full of twittering birds, completely peaceful. There didn’t seem to be any Heartless in this world at all.

“What are your friends like, Pooh?” asked Sora.

“My friends? Hmm, now, there’s Piglet, yes, and Owl. Then there are Roo and Tigger… Eeyore… Rabbit… And…”

“Wow, you have a lot of friends.”

A butterfly fluttered by in front of them.

“What about you, Sora?”

“Me?” Sora stopped in thought and folded his arms.

“What are your friends like?” said Pooh.

“Well, there’s Donald and Goofy and Jiminy… And Naminé…and Riku!”

“Not quite as many as Pooh’s friends.”

“…That’s not quite true. I do have a lot of friends.” He just couldn’t remember them.

I know I have a lot more friends, but… I can’t remember.

Some of them were back on the Destiny Islands. And some of them were on other worlds…but he’d forgotten so many of them.

“It’s nice to have a lot of friends,” said Pooh.

“Yeah. It is.”

The carefree little bear walked very slowly, and Sora had to wait for him, which meant they weren’t getting very far.

“Oh! There we go!” Seeing a wheelbarrow beside the path, Sora ran over to

it. “Pooh, why don’t you get in this?”

If Pooh rode in the wheelbarrow, Sora could push him and go faster, and they were bound to find their friends sooner.

“Oh, all right…”

When Pooh trundled over, Sora picked him up and put him into the wheelbarrow, but— “Whoa!”

The wheel fell off.

“We broke it,” Pooh said, not particularly dismayed.

“Oh well…” Sora took him out of the wheelbarrow bed, and they started walking again.

“This is rather fun, isn’t it?”

“Really?” With his hands clasped behind his head, Sora looked up at the sky. It wasn’t a piercing bright blue, but a soft, gentle sort of blue.

“Walking with a friend is always fun,” said Pooh.

“Yeah, you’re right… Hey, look!” Sora pointed, and Pooh stood on tiptoe to see. There was a tiny pig darting in and out of the bushes. “Is that one of your friends, Pooh?”

Sora broke into a run, and Pooh toddled after him. “C’mon, hurry!”

“Oh, do slow down… I’m rather rumbly in my tumbly…”

“Okay, okay.” Sora got there first and turned to wait for Pooh. Dashing in and back out of the bush, the tiny pig ran into the back of his legs.

“Oooh! Oh no! Oh, dear! D-don’t mind me!” Trembling, the pig looked timidly up at Sora.

“You’re not Pooh’s friend?”

“Well, I, no, I’m not! Er, that is—I’m not *not* Pooh’s friend!” the little pig blurted in a rush as Pooh caught up to them.

“Why, hello there, Piglet.”

“Oh! It’s you, Pooh! I finally found someone!” Piglet sighed in relief and smiled at Pooh. “I lost the others, and I was so worried, I didn’t know what to do.”

“So that’s why you were so fidgety?” said Sora, a little surprised.

“Come with us, Piglet, and we’ll find the rest of our friends,” said Pooh.

“What?” Piglet looked down, abashed. “Oh, my, I don’t know… What should I do…?”

“What do you want to do?” asked Sora.

“Ohh… I don’t know… Oh! Wait!” All of a sudden, Piglet ran into the bushes again. “I promised to give you this.”

They could see a blue balloon tied to a branch as if to keep it well hidden.

“Oh, thank you, Piglet! Now I’ll be able to get some honey.” Pooh ambled into the bushes and took the balloon.

“But how are you going to get honey with a balloon?” said Sora.

“Very easily, of course, Sora! All I have to do is hold on to the balloon, and I’ll float up to where the honey is.”

“Will that really work…?” Sora tilted his head, but Pooh was already in the air, floating away. “Pooh!”

The wind caught the balloon, and Pooh rose steadily higher.

“G-golly…,” Piglet murmured, watching him.

“Pooh! Where are you going?!” Sora jumped up, trying to grab Pooh’s foot, but he couldn’t quite reach.

Just then, he heard wings flapping, and a great big bird caught Pooh by the shoulders. “*Hoo-hoo!* Are you all right, Pooh?”

The bird—he was an owl—brought Pooh back down to the ground and flew up again to perch on a nearby tree, looking down at them.

“Oh yes, Owl. I’m quite all right,” Pooh replied, quite untroubled, and got to his feet.

“Really, Pooh, you must be more careful.”

“I was having fun. Although I would have liked to fly some more…” Pooh looked up at Sora.

“Well, from up in the air, it might be easier for Pooh to find his friends,” said Sora.

“*Hoo-hoo!* Why, that might be so, young man—but once he finds them, what then?”

“Huh?”

“If you spot your friends from up in the air, how do you get down to them? You see, a balloon goes only where the wind blows. Which is usually up!” Owl explained. “You could find your friends only to have the wind keep them just out of reach. Why, I’d rather have to keep looking for my friends than find them and not be able to reach them.”

Finding a friend and not being able to reach him… Like Sora had found Riku.

“If you want to find someone, you’d best do it on foot,” Owl went on. “It can be quite exciting, after all, to stumble across a friend where you least expect them!”

“Well, that is how I feel…when I stumble across some honey,” said Pooh.

“*Hoo!* That’s the spirit, Pooh. Keep moving and keep looking.” With that, Owl spread his wings and flew away.

“That’s what I’ll do,” Pooh agreed. “My tummy is anxious for me to find that honey.”

“Aren’t we looking for your friends and not honey?” Sora reminded him.

“Oh yes… That’s right.”

Pooh and Sora looked at each other and laughed.

“And yet, I am rather hungry…” As Pooh said that a bee went bumbling by.

“A honeybee,” said Sora. “That must mean there’s a hive nearby.”

“Do you think so?” Pooh went clambering after the bee.

Sora walked beside him. It looked like the beehive was under a tree not far away. There were quite a lot of bees buzzing around.

“Is this really a good idea?” Sora worried, hanging back.

Pooh kept going closer. “Of course it is!”

But the moment he stuck a paw into the hive, the bees came after him.

“Oh, dear!” Pooh ran with a burst of speed that Sora wouldn’t have imagined he had in him.

“Pooh!” Sora had instinctively covered his face, and peeked between his fingers to see Pooh run right into a big, heavy tree trunk. A piece of gray rope with a little pink ribbon attached fell out of the tree.

“Oh, ouch…” Pooh rubbed his head as Sora dashed over to him.

“Pooh, are you all right?”

“Oh, my…”

Amid the commotion, a gray donkey slowly came toward them and picked up the piece of rope.

“Much obliged, Pooh,” the donkey said in a low, lazy voice and turned to attach the rope to his own rear.

“Hm? Oh, it’s you, Eeyore,” said Pooh. “I’m sure I’m obliged to you, too. But…er…for what?”

“For running into that tree and getting my tail back for me.”

So the piece of gray rope was really the donkey’s tail.

“Oh, but I was only trying to get away from those bees.”

“Well, anyhow, you helped me. Thanks, Pooh. And…whoever.”

“I’m Sora!”

“Thanks, Sora.”

“You’re welcome, Eeyore!” Pooh and Sora both nodded.

They hadn’t really come here to help Eeyore—it had only happened by

accident. But still, they ended up helping.

Just like I never thought Naminé would be in Castle Oblivion when I came here…, Sora thought. *But she is here, and she's in trouble. So I want to help her.*

"What's the matter, Sora?" asked Pooh.

"Oh, it's nothing."

Sora and Pooh went on through the wood.

Even with all the to-do, it was such a peaceful place. Sora hadn't been able to go anywhere without running into Heartless. It felt like a while since he'd been able to take a nice, lazy stroll like this.

"We haven't found any of your friends, Sora," Pooh remarked, as if it weren't much to be concerned about.

"Yeah… Huh. Maybe they're not here after all."

"Oh…" Pooh did sound a little disappointed at that.

"But I know I'll find them sometime," said Sora. "So let's keep looking together!"

"Perhaps you're right… Oh. There are Roo and Tigger!" Pooh began to amble faster, and up ahead Sora could see a little kangaroo joey hopping on tree stumps. Beside him, a tiger stood with folded arms, looking very serious.

"You don't understand the true meaning of bouncing!" Tigger told little Roo. "You can't just copy ol' Tigger now. You've got to find your own way of bouncing if you want to bounce like me! *Hoo-hoo-hoo!*"

Using his tail like a spring against a tree stump, Tigger launched into the air.

"What wonderful bouncing!" Pooh clapped his paws.

Roo turned to greet him. "Hello, Pooh!"

"Hello there, Roo." Pooh waved. "What are you doing?"

"Tigger's teaching me to bounce." Roo jumped down, smiling. "I was waiting for him in the windy hollow, but I got a little lonely and tired of waiting."

"Hullo, Pooh!"

"Hello, Tigger." Pooh waved politely to the tiger, too.

"Say, how would you like to bounce with us?"

Pooh didn't seem terribly interested in the invitation. "Hmm…"

"Aw, let's try it, Pooh!" Sora gave him a boost up onto a stump. "Just follow me!"

And Sora did a flip in the air as he leaped to another stump.

"Oh, dear, I can't do that."

“Sure, you can!”

Tigger and Roo were also watching Pooh.

“Here goes!” Pooh jumped up and got both feet in the air.

“Not bad at all!” said Tigger, bouncing on his tail. “But neither of you really understand the true meaning of bouncing!”

“The true meaning?” said Sora.

“Yep! You don’t have to do it like me, even though bouncing’s what Tiggers do best,” Tigger replied, demonstrating. “Bouncing is best, you see, when you do it your own way! ’Cos I’m Tigger, and you’re Sora. *Hoo-hoo-hoo!*”

Even in such a bright, peaceful place, Sora’s thoughts kept turning gloomy.

I’m me. And you’re you.

We both want the same thing, but we’re doing it differently… So why do we have to fight…?

How do I get Riku to go back to the Riku I know?

And where is Naminé?

“All right, Tigger and Roo. I’ll see you sometime or another.” Pooh waved to them and started to leave. “Let’s go, Sora. We’ve got to find your friends.”

Sora snapped out of it, returning to the present. “Oh. Yeah!”

He followed Pooh.

Why is such a nice place making me think all these sad thoughts? This isn’t even like me…

A butterfly flew between them, flapping its bright little wings. And just then, something big and round and green came tumbling at them.

“Whoa!” Sora jumped out of the way, but Pooh got bowled over and went tumbling right along with it. “Pooh!”

He was still clinging to the green thing when Sora helped him up. “Oh, ouch…”

“What *is* that?”

The green thing turned out to be a cabbage. “Why, it must be one of Rabbit’s…” Holding on to it, Pooh made a puzzled face.

“Rabbit? That’s one of your friends, right?”

“That’s right. He’s always tending his vegetable garden. He must be in some trouble, I think, if his cabbages are rolling away like this…”

“Well, then, we’d better pick them up.” More cabbages came tumbling down the path, and Sora caught them. Soon there was a pile. “You should help, too, Pooh!”

“Oh yes.” Pooh tried to catch one, but it only bounced off his stout belly.

“Hey, hey!” A cream-colored rabbit came bounding after the cabbages. “You two! Have you seen my cabbages?”

“You mean these?” Sora proudly pointed to the pile.

“Oh! Yes, those, yes! So you caught them for me! They were so much trouble to carry, I thought I would roll them, but that didn’t work out very well at all, you see.”

“It certainly was a surprise when they came tumbling down the path out of nowhere,” said Pooh, although he didn’t sound as if it had been much of a surprise for him.

“I nearly got bowled over,” Sora added. “And Pooh did.”

“I’m sorry, I’m terribly sorry!” Then Rabbit flew into a huff. “Actually, I did mean to use the wheelbarrow, but someone’s broken it!”

That wheelbarrow…?

“Unbelievable! Just outrageous! Who would go about breaking wheelbarrows?!”

“Well, I do believe So—” Pooh began.

Sora clamped a hand over Pooh’s mouth. “Hey! P-Pooh! C’mon, we’d better go! Aren’t we in a hurry?!”

“Oh yes, that’s right. Good-bye, Rabbit.” Pooh waved as though nothing at all could be wrong and started walking.

“Well. Thank you for catching my cabbages!” Holding the bundle of cabbages, Rabbit nodded to them.

“Heh… Actually, we ought to apologize…,” Sora mumbled.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“N-nothing at all! Never mind!” Sora scrambled after Pooh.

As they walked along, Sora was thinking, *It’s no fun being separated from your friends. Being able to see them and not reach them is even lonelier.*

To just keep waiting and do nothing at all…that’s lonely, too.

But Riku and I don’t feel the same way about things. Maybe I made something awful happen without thinking anything of it…

“Whew… We’ve walked such a long way, Sora. I think I need a little rest. If only I had a honeypot for company…”

Only when Pooh spoke to him did Sora notice that he had stopped, lost in thought. “What about your friends?”

“Oh, we did find all of them, after all.” Pooh plopped down on the grass with a smile.

“Hey, Pooh… Do you think I helped you find them?”

“Of course you did. Thank you, Sora.”

Hearing Pooh say that put him in higher spirits. In this world without Donald or Goofy, Sora had been able to help someone else find their friends. He was glad he’d helped Pooh.

“All right,” said Sora. “I’d better be going soon.”

“Where to?”

“…To see my friends.” Sora’s hand tightened on the Keyblade.

“Then, I shall help you look for them, too.”

“That’s okay, Pooh. You should stay here.”

This world was so different from the rest, with all the Heartless and the black-robed figures. This was where Pooh belonged.

“You mean…this is good-bye?” said Pooh.

“No way! I’ll always know where to find you. Well, unless I forget…”

That was a sad thought.

If I forget about my friends, does that mean they aren’t my friends anymore?

Like Riku doesn’t think that I’m his friend anymore.

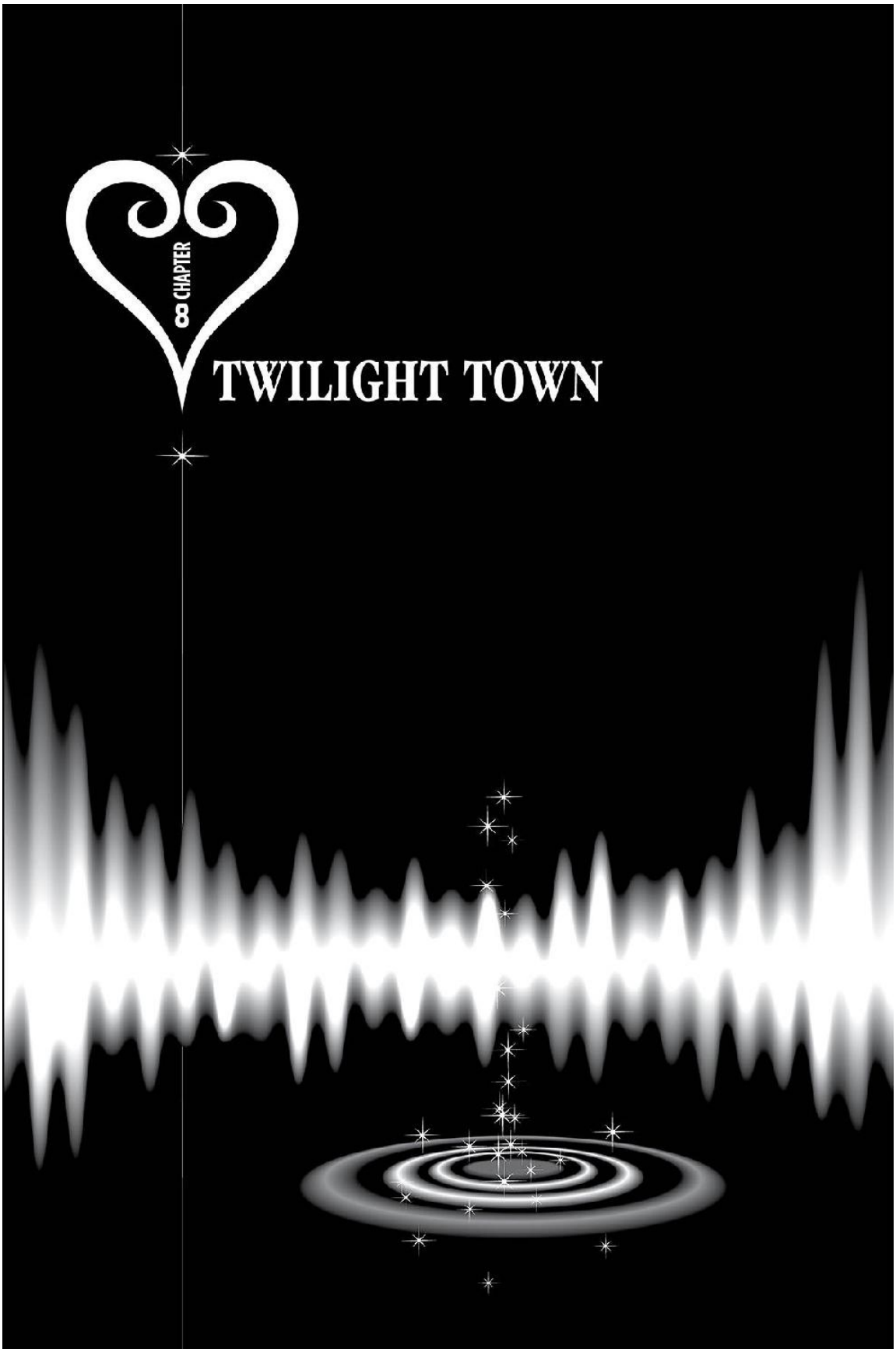
So if I forget about Pooh, then…

Pooh interrupted his sad thoughts again. “Don’t worry. You can count on me. Even if you forget Winnie the Pooh, I won’t forget Sora.”

“…Thanks, Pooh.” That really did make him feel much better. “Well, I’m off now.”

“Good-bye, Sora.”

Sora walked to the door he could see behind some bushes.


8 CHAPTER
TWILIGHT TOWN

CHAPTER 8

TWILIGHT TOWN

The first time we met was in that town.
And ever since we met, I've been here.
Someone who seems the same. Who smells the same.

And you, Sora…
The first time I met you was on the island.
Don't you remember?
Where was it you made that promise to me—to the real me?

I'm waiting on the island.

Hey, what can I do?
What is it…that I *can do?*

“SORA!”

As soon as he stepped into the marble hall, Donald and Goofy ran up to him. “We were gettin’ worried,” said Goofy.

“Me, too!” Sora exclaimed. “Where *were* you guys?!”

Donald and Goofy looked at each other.

“What were you doing, Goofy?”

“What about you, Donald?”

Apparently they’d been apart, too.

“Well, where were you, Jiminy?” said Donald.

Sora only noticed that Jiminy Cricket was back in his pocket when he jumped out of it.

Jiminy cocked his head, puzzled. “Actually, I’m not real sure.”

“We just came to and we were here!” Donald looked even more confused.

“What were you up to, Sora?” Goofy asked.

“When I went through the door, I was all alone in this beautiful forest, and there was a toy bear named Pooh…”

Sora meant to keep explaining—but just then, the air wavered.

Sensing it, he turned with the Keyblade ready. “Who’s there?!”

“Hmph… An ill-mannered lot.” A man stood there, another one in a black cloak like Axel and Larxene. His long hair was parted to either side as if he would hate to have it fall in his face. “Well, I’ll introduce myself, anyway. I am Vexen. I have come to collect your debt, Sora.”

He raised a shield at Sora—it wasn’t a usual sort of shield, but on the larger side, with blades spiking from the edge.

“A debt?” said Donald, mystified. “Sora, do you owe something to this guy?”

Sora couldn’t remember ever meeting him before. “Come on. Of course not.”

“Oh, but you do.” Vexen gave him a twisted smile. “You owe me for reuniting you with your former friend.”

“You don’t mean…?” Sora started. His *former* friend? That could really only mean one person…

Riku.

Sora glared at Vexen. “Then you… You’re the one… You’re the one who’s been controlling Riku?!”

“Indeed. I brought him to you,” Vexen said coldly and shifted his shield.

“What have you done with him?!” Sora stalked closer, gripping the Keyblade.

“I see no need to give you any information about where Riku is. After all…

Why should I trouble you in your final hour?" Vexen lunged with the shield as if he meant to knock the Keyblade from Sora's hands.

The blades nearly caught him. Sparks flew.

"Now freeze!" Vexen flung away the Keyblade, with Sora holding on to it, and from the palm of his hand shot a blast of ice.

"Whoa!" Ice crystals clustered around Sora, freezing his feet in place.

"Wak! Fira!" Donald furiously waved his wand and the ice melted away, but not before the hem of Sora's pants caught fire.

"Ouch!" He jumped and patted the flames out. "Easy there, Donald!"

"Excuse me, you were about to turn into a snowman!" Donald retorted.

"Well, that's enough playing in the snow," said Vexen, not even a little winded, and raised his arm again. "Begone!"

"Look out!" Goofy shoved Sora out of the way. Spikes of ice thrust up from the floor behind Goofy, following him. He yelped and managed to avoid them, dancing in a zigzag.

"Turn Riku back to normal!" Sora shouted and made a huge leap, but Vexen only pushed him aside with the spiked shield.

"Oh, you won't be able to land any blows on me."

It was true. Sora couldn't get around that shield to deal him any damage.

"Sora!"

He'd hit the ground. Donald and Goofy ran to him.

"How can I beat him…?" Sora mumbled, and his friends spoke to him in whispers. "Oh. Okay!"

He got up and pointed the Keyblade straight at Vexen.

"Exactly what do you intend to do?" Vexen blithely looked down his nose at Sora.

"This!" From a good distance, Sora hurled the Keyblade at him.

And Donald shot a spell at it. *"Fira!"*

Now the Keyblade, wreathed in flames, flew at Vexen.

With an annoyed sound, he flung out more ice, trying to stop it, but—

"Aw, no, you don't!" Goofy was already there to block the ice with his shield.

"What—?!"

Then the fiery Keyblade struck Vexen in the chest.

"We did it!"

"So, you can fight after all…," Vexen muttered as he collapsed to his knees. Slowly, he got up again, and his voice was full of overconfidence even while his face was contorted in pain. "I might have expected—you're not one to die very

easily."

"As if we'd ever lose to you!" Donald shouted from behind Sora.

"I wouldn't be so sure. Did you even notice? As we fought, I was delving deep into your memories. And here… Look what I found! A card crafted from all the memories locked in the other side of your heart. If you really want to fight me, step into the world that you create with that card!" And Vexen tossed a single card in Sora's direction.

"Hey, wait!"

Ignoring Sora's cry of protest, he smirked and vanished.

"Memories…in the other side…?" Sora walked closer to the card that he'd let fall to the floor. The picture showed a clock tower with bells on either side and the setting sun behind it. He'd never seen a place like that…

"That's what the feller said, huh?" Goofy picked up the card. "I wonder what'll happen if you use it?"

"Only one way to find out!" Donald stood on tiptoe to get a closer look at it.

"…Well, I don't have any other cards now," said Sora. "So I'll have to use it if we keep going."

"But still… Gee, I don't have a good feeling about this one." Goofy looked at him nervously as he took the card.

"Let's go. We have to beat that guy to get Riku back to normal."

"Oh. Yeah."

Donald and Goofy nodded as Sora faced the door, card in hand.

"Here we go!" He lifted it high.

"Oh, dear—doesn't it look like Vexen's gone and lost his cool?" Larxene giggled, staring into the crystal ball. She and two more of the organization's members stood around it, watching the image of Sora and his friends versus Vexen. "So what now, Axel? I thought Sora wasn't supposed to find out about the *other side*."

Hearing that phrase, Axel finally looked at her.

The *other side*—the world of Sora's other memories.

Twilight Town.

The place where we met…

"Well, as long as no one confronts him, we should be able to get away with it." Axel's brows drew together. "But…"

Marluxia didn't wait for him to finish. "Let's have Naminé deal with it. And you go, too, Axel. I trust you know what needs to be done."

Axel’s frown twisted into a cocky grin. “Haven’t a clue, really. Maybe you could spell it out for me.”

“Vexen has clearly committed an act of treason against the organization,” said Marluxia with a small smile, as if they were speaking of trifles. “You must eliminate the traitor.”

“No taking that back later.” Without wasting any more time, Axel turned and left.

Larxene was laughing quietly. “Too clever by half, Marluxia.”

“So what happens now, I wonder?”

Marluxia and Larxene returned their gaze to the crystal ball.

The sky over their heads was stained red with sunset—a beautiful twilight sky that brought a dreamy feeling of déjà vu. In the center of the town a clock tower stood tall, with bells hanging on either side, seeming to glow in the vermilion light.

A few steps ahead, Donald looked back at the other two. “So… Where are we, Sora?”

The streets they stood in felt cozy somehow. Some of the roads were wider, looking spacious enough for large vehicles to pass. But they didn’t see any people.

“I don’t remember being here before, either.” Sora squinted at the buildings on the other side of the street. He didn’t remember it. But somehow he knew this place.

“Maybe you forgot this town, too, just like the other stuff,” said Goofy.

Then Jiminy jumped out of Sora’s pocket, looking concerned. “Our memories are practically gone…”

Silence stretched between the four of them.

“We’ll be okay,” Sora said brightly and took out the paopu fruit charm. “See, look at this…”

“Naminé’s good luck charm!” Goofy leaned over to look at the star-shaped pendant.

“There’s a special memory that goes with this… One night, when Naminé and I were little, there was this meteor shower.”

So many falling stars—all those lights pouring down like rain.

That’s when I promised Naminé. Now I remember.

“Naminé was really scared. She started crying. She said, ‘What if a falling star hits the islands?’ So I told her, ‘If any stars come this way, I’ll just hit ’em

back into outer space!’” Sora grinned, telling the story, and swung the Keyblade at the sky. “I was swinging my toy sword around the whole time. And Naminé just smiled and said, ‘Thanks.’ Then she gave me this.”

The night of the meteor shower—Naminé crying and Naminé smiling. He could remember it so clearly.

“I heard, she arrived on the night of the meteor shower…”

The phrase came into his head, forming out of nowhere like a dewdrop.

She came…the meteor shower…

Whose words were they?

Right, he must have been telling someone else about what happened that night.

But who?

Riku.

That’s it. I remember I was talking to Riku about the meteor shower.

Who was *she*?

What happened that night?

She came to the islands on the night of the meteor shower.

That girl—Naminé.

But I made a promise to Naminé that night…

Something’s off… Am I remembering it wrong?

“That night, I observed a great meteor shower in the sky.”

He’d heard those words somewhere, too. No—he’d read them.

But where?

The memories spun round and round in Sora’s head. But they wouldn’t match up.

At the center of all these unconnected memories was Naminé. Her white dress, her long flaxen hair.

“I’m so sorry, Sora. All this, because of me…”

Naminé floated up in his mind, then, pale and luminescent. She was apologizing… And with just that, the frustrations and doubts in his heart were clearing away.

“Hey, Sora? What’s wrong?” said Donald.

“…I was just remembering Naminé. She said she had her good luck charm ever since she was a baby.” Sora tucked it back into his shirt.

“And she gave it to you? Aww…”

“Yeah. So I promised her… From now on, *I’ll* bring you good luck and keep you safe…”

I made a promise. But then I forgot all about Naminé.

I have to help her. I have to find her. I have to tell her…I'm sorry.

"Well, then, now's your chance! You gotta keep your promise!" said Goofy, and Sora nodded emphatically.

The setting sun spread its color over the whole town.

"Kind of a strange town, huh…?" Donald waddled through the streets, unhurried.

"But it's got Heartless…!" Having spotted some ahead, Sora raised his Keyblade. When they noticed the trio, they slowly crept closer, almost reluctantly. Their attacks were slow, too.

"Take this!" Sora lunged, and a Heartless disappeared with just a single blow from the Keyblade.

"Gawrsh, aren't they awful weak?" said Goofy, cocking his head.

"It just means we got stronger!" Donald replied with a furious wave of his wand.

The Heartless were clustered here and there, but they all moved sluggishly and didn't come for them with much force.

"Do we really need to get rid of 'em?" Goofy wondered, though he had his shield up just in case.

"Why wouldn't we? Heartless are Heartless, right?" said Donald.

"But they're pretty harmless. See, they don't even try to attack us unless we get really close…" Goofy frowned. "Wait… Didn't we come across some Heartless like this before? Heartless that don't attack?"

"We did?" Donald couldn't remember that at all.

Neither could Sora. Heartless that didn't attack?

"Well, I'm not real sure… But I get the feeling we shouldn't hurt 'em, if they're not hurtin' us."

Sora didn't understand any more of what Goofy was saying. Was it because he couldn't remember? Or…

The sun never actually seemed to sink below the horizon in this town.

Feeling like he'd seen its colors somewhere before, Sora turned. The setting sun still illuminated the clock tower—unmoving. Its warm red light fell on them.

As if something had led them there, the trio found themselves standing in front of a big gate. Beyond it, they could see a mansion. Images floated half-formed in Sora's head.

“Something…feels really strange,” he murmured.

Goofy turned to him anxiously. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m sure I don’t know this place, but…it’s starting to feel familiar to me.” Sora looked up at the gate.

He’d never seen it before—but he had. It was that sort of feeling.

Donald was walking ahead. He came back closer, staring at Sora. “You must’ve come here sometime before.”

“Like with Naminé,” Goofy added. “You forgot lots of other stuff, and that’s why you remember this place now.”

“No… It’s different,” said Sora. “With Naminé, my memories…sort of came drifting back to me, in little pieces. But not now. It’s not memories—just this feeling like it’s familiar somehow.”

That was all. Nostalgia. Which was a very strange feeling to have when there were no memories.

“Familiar, is it?”

“—Vexen!”

The tall sickly man was standing there with the setting sun at his back, narrowing his eyes at the trio. “Sora… I’ve got a question for you. Your memories of Naminé or your feeling about this place—which of the two is more real to you, I wonder?”

“Naminé, of course!” Sora blurted and took a fighting stance with the Keyblade. “Whatever it is that I’m feeling here, I bet it’s just another one of your mean little tricks!”

Vexen made a nasty chuckle. “Memory can be a cruel thing. In its silence, we forget, but in its obsession, it binds our hearts.”

Silence… Forget… Obsession?

My heart is bound? Sora thought furiously. *What does he think he’s talking about?!*

“I told you,” Vexen rambled on. “This place was created solely from another side of your memory. It’s on the other side of your heart that the memory of this place exists. Your heart remembers.”

The other side of my heart—other memories? He had no idea what Vexen was saying. “You’re wrong! I *don’t* know this place!”

However familiar it felt, the memory just wasn’t there.

“If you remain bound by the chain of memories and refuse to believe what is truly in your own heart…then you may as well throw it away. You are no Keyblade master—only a puppet controlled by memory. Exactly like my Riku.

Your existence is worth nothing!”

“*Your* Riku? Worth nothing…?” Nothing this guy said made any sense, Sora thought. “That’s enough! *You’re* the one who changed Riku! I’m not gonna listen to you!”

“Oh? You think *I* changed Riku?” Vexen cackled.

“What’s so funny?!”

“Hm… Well, perhaps you *could* say I changed him. Still…the fact is, you feel this place is familiar to you. And so you cannot trust your own feelings—isn’t that right?” Vexen sounded perfectly calm, as if to highlight Sora’s angrily raised voice.

“Every word you’ve said is a lie!”

With the Keyblade ready, Sora leaped at him. But Vexen already had his shield up and deflected him once again.

“You’re no hero. Only a puppet who’s thrown away a hero’s heart.”

“I’d never throw away my heart!” Sora stood up again, pointing the Keyblade at him. “I’m gonna take you down and save Riku and Naminé. *That’s* what’s in my heart!”

Of course I haven’t thrown away my heart! he thought. *That doesn’t even make any sense. Just because I’ve lost some memories doesn’t mean I’m losing my heart!*

“You certainly are a foolish puppet. Now die!” Vexen shot clusters of ice from his hand.

“Fira!” From behind Sora, Donald sent his magic to fizzle out the ice and then stepped forward. “Better not forget about us!”

“’Cos we wanna help Riku and Naminé, too! And the king!” said Goofy and gave a healing potion to Sora, who wasn’t totally unscathed.

“The king’s loyal servants… Don’t make me laugh. Are you all talk, or are you actually going to fight?”

“Donald!” cried Sora and threw the Keyblade at Vexen.

“Firaga!” Donald’s magic set the Keyblade aflame.

“Ha! You think that move will work on me again?!” Vexen jumped up high into the air to bring the bladed edge of his shield down on them.

“Whoa!” Goofy tried to block him but went flying.

“Too warm here, don’t you think?” Vexen sent a blast of ice to freeze Goofy on the spot.

“Waaak! Fire!” Donald frantically worked to melt the ice surrounding him.

“Hmph. How about this?!”

Chunks of ice flew one after another at Sora, but he jumped to dodge them and landed behind Vexen, who made a frustrated snarl. Sora swung the Keyblade and Vexen immediately fell to one knee.

"…To think you have such strength, even at the mercy of your memory—your existence is a hazard indeed!"

"None of that matters! Just make Riku go back!" Sora shouted, keeping the Keyblade pointed at him.

"Just *make him go back*? You really have no idea what you're saying. The Riku you speak of has but one fate—to sink into the darkness. And you, Sora, will share that fate! If you continue to seek Naminé, the shackles will tighten, you will lose your heart…and become no more than Marluxia's pawn!"

"Marluxia?! What's Naminé got to do with—" Sora didn't get to finish the question. A dazzling light blinded them.

He heard Vexen grunt, and then in the next moment, he saw him sprawled on the ground. "Vexen?!"

"Yo, Sora. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

That was Axel's voice…

"*Ngh.*.. Axel, why…?" Vexen choked out, digging his nails into the dirt as he tried to get up.

"I came to stop you from talking too much…by eliminating your existence, that is." Axel smirked and took a step closer to him.

"No… Don't do it…"

"We're Nobodies. We have no one to be—we just *are*. But now you don't have to *be* at all. No more existence, no more memories. You're off the hook."

Axel didn't seem to be paying attention to Sora and the others. He only looked at Vexen.

"No one to be?" What could that even mean…?

"Don't… No, please don't…! I don't want to—"

"Bye, now." Axel shot a bright light from his hand again.

Vexen's scream echoed through the strange landscape—and then he was gone, not a trace remaining.

"What are you— What *are* you people?!" Sora demanded.

"Hm. Not sure. I wonder about that myself." With that, Axel stepped into thin air and vanished.

"Axel?!"

The only reply was the distant rumble of a train.

This familiar feeling… These lost memories.

And those times with Naminé coming back to him.

How much was right, and how much was wrong? How much had he forgotten…?

Sora stood dazed in the twilight.

Axel walked through the long corridors of the castle. Normally, he wouldn't bother walking places like this. But he needed time to himself.

I don't have a single friend in this place. All these people on my side—and his and the organization's… But I don't know if I can say that we're really on the same side.

I'm alone here.

He's nobody—no one at all—and yet he is somebody.

Shards of emotion, fragments of memory. So alike…but they're completely different things.

Even if we can hold on to a few fragments of memory, we can't have the smallest shard of emotion.

Nostalgia… And memory.

We are the ones who lost their hearts—the ones who are no one. Nobodies.

Not light nor darkness—we live in the twilight.

Axel stopped outside the crystal ball room and took a deep breath.

Why are we here? What are we doing?

No—why am I *here?*

Still asking himself that question, he opened the door.

"Nice work, Axel. I say good riddance to that blabbermouth!" Larxene grinned at him.

He ignored her and went to the other man in the room. "Marluxia… You sent Vexen to test Sora's strength, didn't you?"

Marluxia didn't answer.

"Not just Sora's," said Larxene. "Yours, too."

Axel raised one eyebrow.

"We weren't sure if you actually had it in you to take out a fellow member," she went on, sounding as though she found it hilarious. "Well, I guess you did! It's time to join up. With the three of us, taking over the organization will be a cinch!"

"Oh, so that's where Sora comes in," Axel grumbled.

"Of course! He wants to see Naminé, so why don't we just let him have what he wants?"

At that, a cruel smile came to Marluxia's face. He strode to the corner of the room, where a girl sat in a small chair, holding tightly to a sketchbook.

"Rejoice, Naminé. Soon you'll meet the hero you've been longing for."

Naminé's shoulders tensed when he said her name. She didn't look up when she spoke, her voice tiny and faint. "I'm…glad."

"But we're warning you," Larxene said brightly from behind Marluxia. "You'd better not do anything to betray Sora's feelings. Understand, little one?"

"…I understand."

"All you need to do is merge the layers of Sora's memories and bring his heart closer to you," Marluxia told her.

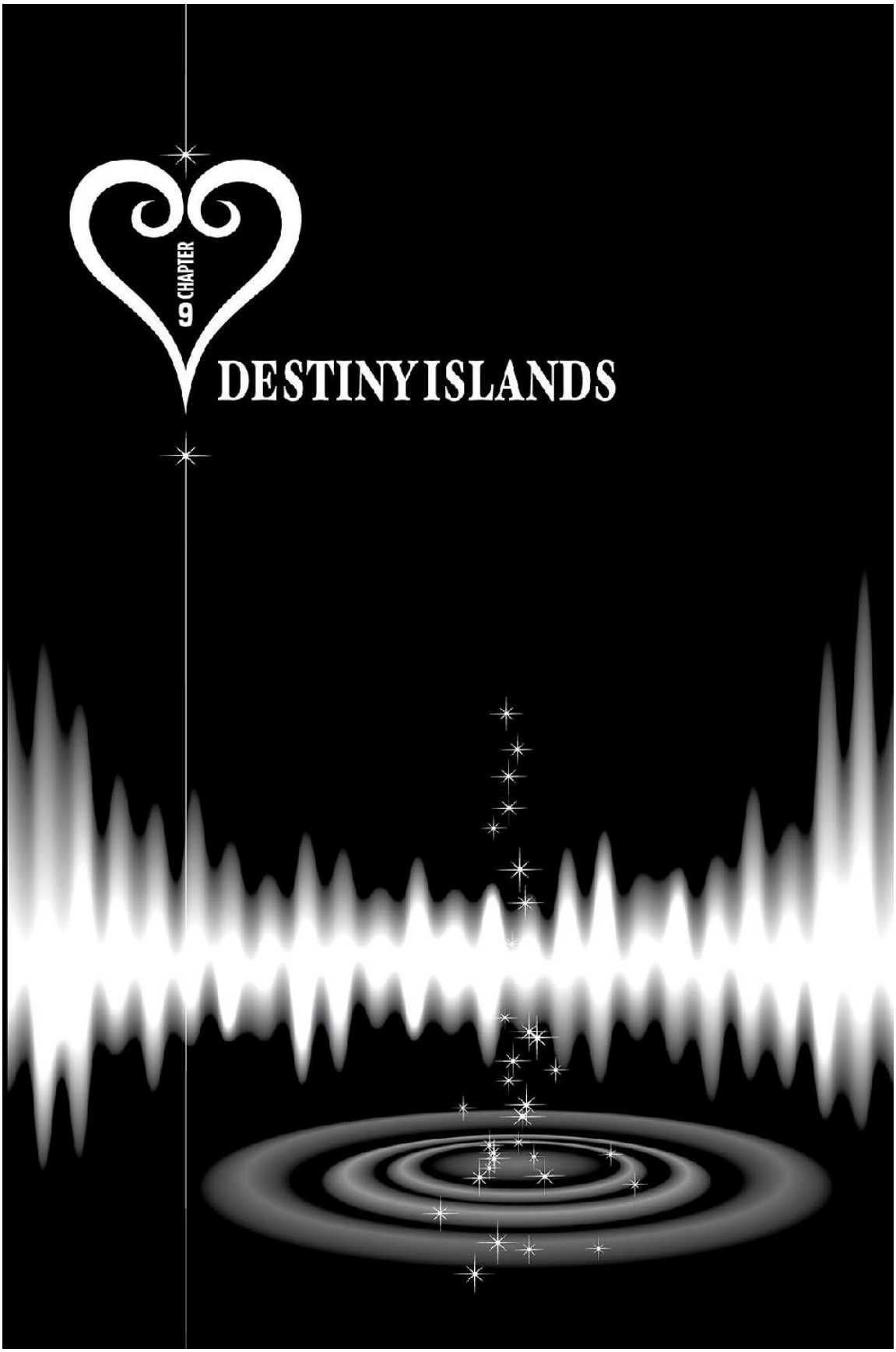
Then he glanced sidelong at Larxene, and the two of them vanished.

"Naminé…," he said softly, but she didn't stir.

Sora…

Even if you come for me, what then…?

What should I do?


CHAPTER 9
DESTINY ISLANDS

CHAPTER 9

DESTINY ISLANDS

Will I really get to meet you? Is the one you'll meet really me?

The girl you knew from the islands—it was me but another me.

I don't exist anywhere. I'm nobody.
Or maybe I'm just a thing.

If I can meet you on that island…something might change.

But the me that you'll meet there is a different me.
A false me.

If I can meet you, Sora, will something change?

WHEN THEY STEPPED AGAIN INTO THE MARBLE HALL, it felt terribly cold.

There was so much Sora had to think about.

What was Vexen trying to tell me? Why did Axel eliminate him?

Why can't Riku go back to normal?

What's it mean that his fate is to sink into the darkness?

"Sora…," said Donald, worried, but he didn't reply.

Goofy patted Donald's shoulder and shook his head. The three of them walked to the next door.

"Hey!" Suddenly realizing something, Sora stopped in his tracks and turned back.

"What is it?" said Goofy.

Sora stuck a hand into his pocket and started rummaging. "I thought so… We're out of cards."

The door in front of them looked the same as all the others, so it probably wouldn't open without a card. Vexen had given him the card for the last world… and before that, who had been giving him the cards…?

"Does that mean we're at a dead end?" said Donald.

Just then, another voice spoke at Sora's back.

"If you go any farther, you'll hurt Naminé."

Sora turned—but of course, he'd already recognized the voice. Riku.

"You still want to fight?" Sora held the Keyblade ready. "But Vexen's gone! You're free now!"

At least, he thought Vexen had been controlling Riku. So with Vexen gone, Riku should be free…

With his sword raised, Riku spoke slowly. "I'm protecting Naminé from you. That's what's in my heart."

"We can protect her *together*!" cried Sora.

But Riku didn't move, only kept glaring at him. "*I'm* the one who's keeping her safe! I made a promise to her!"

"You did…?"

No—I promised her, Sora thought. He lowered the Keyblade.

"There was a meteor shower one night when we were little…," Riku began. "Naminé got scared and said, 'What if a falling star hits the islands?' So I told her, 'If any falling stars come this way, I'll protect you!'"

Goofy spoke up first. "But that story's the same as Sora's!"

"What are you talking about?" Riku raised his eyebrows.

“You…made a promise? With a toy sword?” Sora asked, all uncertainty.

“What…? How do you know about that?!” Riku shot back.

That’s what I’d like to say, thought Sora, and then his voice rose. “Because… that was the promise *I* made to her that night! I said I’d protect her!”

That night…with those shooting stars, falling all around the islands. I promised Naminé.

“Promise?”

“I promise!”

He could remember their voices saying those words so clearly.

I’m the one who made that promise to Naminé.

“Stop lying! You weren’t the one there that night!” Riku said fiercely, swinging his sword in empty space.

“*You’re* the one who wasn’t there! And she gave her good luck charm to me!”

“Her what…?”

“This!” Sora reached into his shirt and showed him the paopu fruit pendant. That yellow star-shaped fruit made into the good luck charm that Naminé had treasured.

“How did you get that?! Why do you— Oh. Good try, Sora.” Riku took a step closer to him.

“…Huh?”

“That must be a fake. I’ve got the real one right here!” Riku took out a pendant—a charm made from a paopu fruit, exactly the same as the one Sora held.

“Wha…? *Two* of them?!”

“Fakes should be destroyed!” Without any more warning, Riku jumped, lunging for Sora.

“Whoa!” He barely managed to block Riku’s sword with the Keyblade, pushing it back. “It’s *not* a fake! Naminé gave this to me!”

“Sora!” Gripping his wand, Donald ran closer, and Goofy followed.

“This is my fight! Stay out of the way!” Sora told them.

They exchanged glances and hung back.

“Gee, that’s not a very nice way of puttin’ it…,” said Goofy.

“Shut up!” Riku snapped. “*I’m* the one who’s real!”

He knocked Sora back.

They both had the same thought. *But it was me… I made that promise…*

This time Sora struck at Riku. “*My* pendant’s the real one!”

He felt the impact through the Keyblade. Riku was bowled over.

“…Ngh!” Riku winced, his shoulders heaving with huge breaths, as he got to his feet again.

Sora yelled his name, but Riku only turned his back and ran. Something tumbled out of his pocket and fell to the floor.

“Wait…! Riku!” Sora began to chase after him but stopped short.

There, beside his feet, was Riku’s pendant.

“Isn’t that Naminé’s good luck charm?” Donald picked it up.

“It’s just like mine… How’d he get this?”

Donald handed it to Sora, and the moment he touched it, the pendant began to shine and sparkle. It changed—and then he was holding a single card.

“It turned into a card!” Donald peered at it.

The picture showed a small island surrounded by a wide blue sea.

“Gawrsh… I don’t get what’s goin’ on here at all,” said Goofy, his head tilted.

“All we can do is keep moving.” Sora began walking to the door again, his fingers clutching the card tightly.

“Wait. C’mon, Sora!” Donald shouted after him. “Something’s fishy about this!”

He paused and turned to look back slowly.

“How can the two of you have the same memory?” Goofy’s brow was furrowed in confusion. “Ya can’t both be right. Doesn’t that mean someone’s rememberin’ it wrong?”

“I’m wrong? Fine! Then don’t believe me!” Sora snapped.

There’s no way I’m wrong. If anybody is, it’s Riku.

I can’t *be wrong!*

“Aw, that’s not what I meant,” said Goofy. “We’re just kinda worried.”

Sora barely heard him. *What if…? What if I am remembering it wrong?*

That’s what Vexen was saying. I’m just a puppet who’s thrown away a hero’s heart… A puppet controlled by memory.

Just like Riku.

What was that supposed to mean?

“Then, let me ask Naminé. That should clear it up!” Sora told them. “Look, we don’t have time to stand around in here. Let’s *go*!”

He turned away from them again and kept walking, stamping his feet on the marble.

A brief silence fell. Goofy broke it, asking sadly, “Sora… What happened to ya?”

Sora didn’t even look back to shout, “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Well, you’re gettin’ real touchy when it comes to stuff about Naminé… Isn’t it kinda weird?”

Is he saying I’m crazy? Finally Sora turned.

“After all, before we came to this castle, you didn’t even remember what her name was… And now she’s the only thing you talk about,” said Goofy, looking terribly worried.

“It doesn’t make sense. You gotta slow down and think about this stuff!” Donald added.

“Think about *what*? What’s the matter with you guys? You want me to abandon her?!”

“No, that’s not it…” Stuck, Donald looked at Goofy.

“Then, do whatever you want! You guys can lay back and take a nap for all I care!” Sora turned away from them once again. “*I’m* going to find Naminé!”

He ran ahead to the door. *I have to find her soon. I have to prove I’m right.*

And not Riku.

I’m not wrong, I just know I’m not…

“Sora!” Donald and Goofy both rushed to follow him.

Jiminy Cricket poked his head out. “Sora, that was no way to—”

“Keep it to yourself!” Sora cut him off and held the card up to the door.

“Hold on, Sora!” Donald caught up to him. The door opened—but the moment Sora ran through, it closed again, right in front of Donald’s beak. *“Sora!”*

But he was in another world, and he couldn’t hear them anymore.

In the corner of the crystal ball room, Naminé still sat, staring at her lap. Or rather, at the sketchbook in it.

The sketchbook was open to a drawing of a little island in a blue sea.

“Naminé.” In no hurry, Axel crossed the room to stand beside her. No one else was in the room.

“You’re all that he’s got left,” he told her gently.

The crystal ball showed Sora alone on the island.

But…there’s nothing I can do. Not now. Naminé hugged the sketchbook to her chest.

“If you don’t stop this, no one will,” said Axel.

At that she finally looked up. *Now?*

“How many times do I need to say it? You’re the only one who can help

him.”

“But I… It’s too late.” Her voice was scarcely audible.

Too late. It’s already begun.

“You shouldn’t give up just yet.” Axel moved closer to her, looking into her face. “Say, Naminé—have you noticed? Marluxia doesn’t seem to be around.”

“What…are you saying?”

“Just that there’s no one here who would want to get in your way.”

Naminé stood up.

“Just make it count,” he said.

She gave him a tiny nod and ran out of the room.

She would go…to the islands. Sora’s world—the Destiny Islands.

Alone now, Axel laughed softly. And then louder. “Ha-ha-ha! Now *this* should be interesting. So it was worth all that trouble after all!”

He went to the crystal ball to peer at the image of Sora.

“Now, then! Sora, Naminé, Riku, Marluxia, Larxene! It’s about time you gave me one hell of a show!”

There was no one to hear his speech.

Sora could hear the rush of the waves. Over and over…that soft, sweet sound.

The blue sky and the sea that seemed to go on forever.

This was the entire world.

He squinted against the light that poured off the water.

This is…

“I’m not going crazy, am I? I know exactly where this is!” Sora mumbled to himself, looking around.

That seashore—it was a sight he knew.

“Yeah! This is our island! Where Naminé and I used to play together!” He walked down to the beach.

He’d played here every day. With Naminé and Riku and…

“Heeey!”

His friends called to him from the distance and came running. It was all just the same.

But…

“Hi, Sora!” The one who greeted him first was a boy holding a wooden sword.

“Whatcha wanna do today?” asked a grinning girl with hair that curled up at the ends.

Beside her stood another boy, a little bit older, looking at Sora with his arms folded.

But he couldn't remember their names.

"Hey, guys! Am I glad to see you, uh…"

What am I supposed to do now? The only ones I remember from the island are Riku and Naminé.

I can't believe I forgot my other friends' names… Before this all started, I spent my whole life here. What's happening to me?

Sora was hanging his head. The others surrounded him, looking confused.

"'Uh,' what?" said the boy with the wooden sword.

"We got food on our faces?" the older boy joked with a lopsided smile.

"Oh, please, Wakka," the girl retorted. "Only you could be dumb enough to not notice food stuck to your face."

So the older boy's name was Wakka at least.

He faced the girl with his hands on his hips. "Hey, whoa, Selphie! That's a low blow, ya?"

"I dunno, Wakka," said the smaller boy. "I think she might be on the mark…"

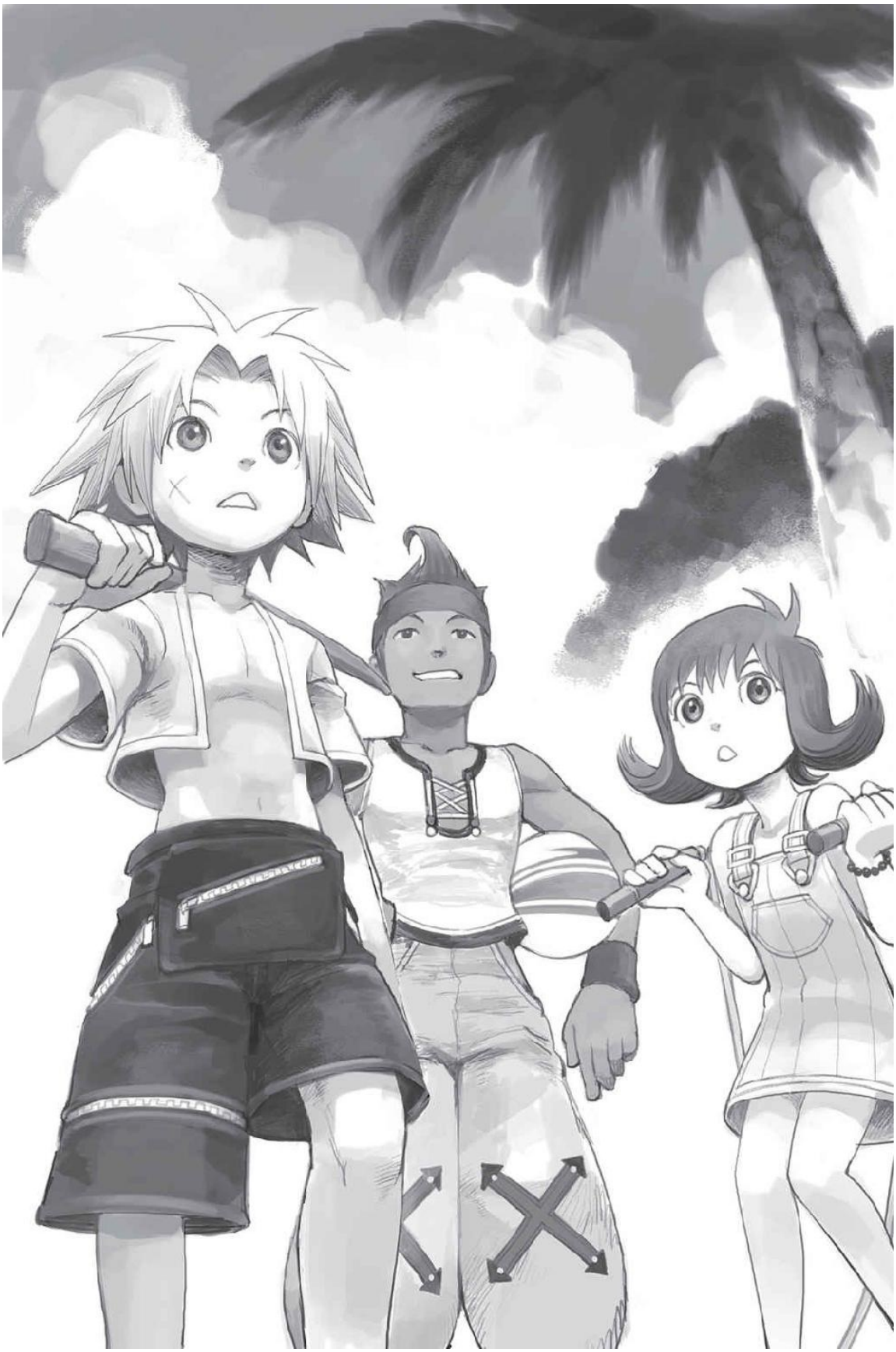
"Aw, not you, too, Tidus!" Wakka pouted, making a fist.

Right—Selphie and Wakka and Tidus.

"Oh yeah… That's right. Yeah." Sora nodded to himself.

Wakka cocked his head at Sora. "…You all right there?"

"Yeah—just talking to myself," Sora replied, managing a smile.



He didn’t feel like he could explain very well about his memory or about Castle Oblivion.

But Selphie, looking like she’d reached a conclusion all on her own, took a step closer to Sora and stared up into his face. “I know! You’re thinking about *her* again.”

Sora’s eyebrows went up a little. *Her? Who? Does Selphie mean…?*

“Ohhh, I get it,” Tidus added with a smug grin. “Yeah, he’s a total zombie when she’s on his mind.”

“That would explain why he’s actin’ all funny to us.” Wakka nodded knowingly.

Selphie leaned over to whisper, “I bet you want us to take a hike so you two can be *alone*, huh?”

“Umm… I guess so,” Sora mumbled, rather uncertain.

Her… Her! They must mean Naminé!

But what about Riku?

“Okay, okay. We’ll disappear for a while. Go find her, cowboy!” Selphie smiled a sort of grown-up smile and moved out of his way.

If he kept going this way, up ahead there would be a hut…and then the way to the little islet.

“We’ll try to be quiet while we *spy* on you!” Tidus snickered, though he stepped aside, too.

“Hey, Sora’s serious,” Wakka scolded him. “Give the guy some room.”

Tidus grinned. “Just kidding!”

Right…it was always like this. Just everyone being silly together like this. How could Sora forget that?

“See you later, Sora!” said Selphie. Taking that as a cue, Sora ran up the beach.

The salty breeze, his feet kicking through the sand.

He could remember it all. This was Destiny Island. *Our island.*

No way would he forget.

Across the shore of the inlet, there was a little cave, and through that, a wider beach. He ran over the sand into the hut and up the stairs. And then, the pier that led to the islet. *See, I remember it all.*

He ran across the island, merging it together with his memories.

There’s the paopu tree on the islet where the three of us would watch the sunset. Riku and Naminé and me.

The sunset made the sea all red, and it was so pretty…and peaceful…

Sora ran down the pier. At the end there was a boy with silver hair, who turned to him with a grin.

“Hey, Sora. What’s the big hurry?”

“I know you… You’re Riku!”

It had taken Sora a moment. Because Riku was smiling now…just like in those days.

“Gee, thanks for remembering me,” Riku laughed. “It’s been, what, a couple of hours?”

“I—I wouldn’t forget! Anyway, are you okay? Are you still under his control?”

“Under…his control? What are you talking about?”

Sora stopped short. *So this isn’t the real Riku… He’s just a fake.*

No—that’s not right! This is *the real Riku. The real one, who isn’t being controlled, the Riku I remember.*

“Uh… What’re you staring at me like that for?”

“You must be the Riku from my memories…,” Sora mumbled.

“The Riku from your memories? Sounds like you’re stuck in the land of make-believe. You should try growing up a little if you want to take care of *her*.”

Sora’s eyebrows twitched. *Her… Her?*

“Hey, speaking of her…,” he began, but a sound like an earthquake cut him off. “Whoa! What’s happening?!”

“How should I know?!” Riku retorted.

Didn’t this happen before? Sora thought. *I don’t know… I can’t remember.*

“I’m gonna go warn the others!” Riku took off at a run.

“Then I should go and—”

As if telling him not to waste time talking, Riku turned back to yell, “I know! It’s your job to look after her. Go, Sora!”

“Okay!” Sora nodded and began to run again, too.

Right. I have to protect her. That’s my job. I promised—no matter what happens, I’ll keep her safe. I said I’ll protect Naminé…

Dark clouds had begun to cover the sky like a gathering storm.

I have to protect Naminé…

Just as he was about to reach the pier, right before his eyes, it started to collapse. A gale was rising, shaking the cocoyum trees.

“The island’s going to fall apart…!” Sora looked up and saw an enormous black shadow.

It’s…that thing…!

The shadow roared and coalesced into a humanoid shape—which came straight for Sora.

“You again?!” Sora raised the Keyblade and blocked the swipe of its black claws. It felt like by now he must have fought this thing a hundred times. The Keyblade shone brightly, cutting straight through the shadow. “You can’t beat me!”

Wounds of light streamed open from its darkness.

“I’m *never* gonna lose to you!” Sora jumped high.

I won’t lose—I’m going to protect Naminé!

He brought the Keyblade down on the huge shadow’s head and felt the impact in his arms. The thing screamed, and then it disappeared, as if being absorbed back into the dark clouds overhead.

“Naminé…” His shoulders heaving as he tried to catch his breath, Sora looked around. “Right… I have to protect her… Naminé! Where are you?!”

He looked back at the islet again, where he had just been talking to Riku. He didn’t think anyone could be there now—but there, right there, was the girl in white, with her flaxen hair flying in the wind.

“Naminé…”

She turned to look at him. “Sora… You really came for me.”

The wind tearing through the island began to settle.

“It’s you… It’s really you…” Sora walked toward her slowly, as if she might vanish again.

I missed you! I missed you for so long!

He wanted to run up and throw his arms around her. “I’ve gone through so much just to see you!”

“I know… Me, too.” Her smile was tinged with sorrow. “But this isn’t right. I messed up. I wanted to see you…but this isn’t the right way.”

Naminé looked down and turned away from him, staring out at the sea. The water and the sky alike seemed washed with ink—the color of darkness.

Just moments ago, a gale had been raging, but now the sea was terribly calm. He couldn’t even hear the waves.

“Naminé…?” Sora began to take a step and halted. Something gave him the feeling that he mustn’t go any closer to her.

“I was alone for so long. I just couldn’t bear it anymore…”

Alone? Why?

But weren’t we always together? We were never apart. The good luck charm kept us connected.

“So I called out to your heart and had you come all the way out to this place. You came for me, and I’m so, so happy…but your heart…I had to…”

Maybe she had turned away from him because she was crying.

“Don’t worry,” said Sora. “I’m here because I promised that I’d protect you, Naminé.”

“Sora… Thank you.” She turned to face him again.

Right… No matter what happens to my heart, I promised Naminé, and that can’t ever change. No matter how many memories I lose, so long as I remember her, it’ll be all right.

“But I’m sorry,” she said, hanging her head. “I’m not supposed to be in this picture.”

“It’s…not you…?” Sora echoed, and then another voice spoke from behind him.

“That’s true.”

When he turned—it was her.

“Naminé?!”

There were two of her.

“That isn’t me. I’m not there.”

“I don’t really exist inside your heart.”

“I don’t exist in anyone’s heart.”

He couldn’t follow which Naminé said what. He only knew it was her.

She wasn’t herself? She wasn’t here? She was…?

“Wh… Naminé, what are you saying? What’s gotten into you?!” he shouted at both of the Naminés. “Weren’t we always together? But then you had to go away…so I came here to find you!”

They both looked sad.

“Was it really me you wanted to see?”

The one who spoke was the second Naminé. He was sure of that.

“Of course it was! I know I’ve forgotten a lot of things in this castle, but… never anything about you!” Sora reached into his shirt and took out the good luck charm.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

It was Naminé he’d been talking to.

“Look! You gave this to me, didn’t you?!”

“You still have it…” Looking at the sea, she smiled.

“No, Sora! You can’t trust me!” shouted the second Naminé. The first one,

who was looking at the silent, dark sea, turned away from him.

“Think, Sora,” said the one who still faced him, gently urging. “Think just one more time about who’s most special to you. Call out to that shard of memory that glimmers faintly deep inside you. No matter how far away the light gets, your heart’s voice will always reach it.”

“Who’s most special to me?” Sora looked at the pendant in his hand. “That’s easy. It’s you, Na—”

Just as he began to say her name, the pendant shone with light.

"Huh…?"

The yellow star-shaped fruit transformed into a different charm made of five pink seashells tied together.

Those seashells—thalassa shells?!

"I'm making them so even if one of us gets lost, we'll make it back here safe and sound. So the three of us will always be together."

The voice came to him from somewhere.

That's right—sailors used to wear thalassa shell charms to make sure they'd come home…

Who had said that? Naminé?

But the good luck charm that Naminé gave me was made out of a paopu fruit…

"SORA!"

One of them cried his name and he looked up. It was the Naminé facing the inky sea, slowly turning toward him.

And then—it was a girl with red hair.

Behind her the blue water glittered. The sound of the waves washed over his heart.

"I know you will." Her lips moved and Sora knew that was what she said.

But in the next instant, bright light covered everything—and the island was back to normal.

"What just happened…?"

Sora glanced all around. No one was here. The only sound was the soft rush of the waves.

"Who…was that? I can't remember her…but she feels so familiar…"

Yes…familiar. Like that town in the twilight.

Sora ambled over the beach.

There was a little waterfall with a thicket of foliage beside it, and behind that, there was a cave…

"Wait… Naminé?!" Sora exclaimed. "Where are you?!"

He jumped into the bushes.

The passageway opened up into a little cave. Light shone down from the ceiling.

And in the back of the cave was a door that wouldn't open.

There were the doodles on the wall that he and Naminé had drawn when they

were little. Or…they should have been.

Sora put his fingertips to the wall. The girl in the drawing was the girl he'd just seen. Her hand held out a paopu fruit to the drawing of Sora.

"What's that mean…?"

Sora picked up a pebble and added to the doodle—his own hand holding out a paopu fruit to her.

If two people gave each other a paopu fruit, their destinies would be intertwined… There was a story like that, anyway.

Light streamed into the cave. The far-off rushing of the waves was so calming…

"…Naminé?"

Someone important to me.

No, wait—that's not right.

Search for the pieces of memory hidden deep inside my heart. The memories of this island.

The one who's most special to me.

"I know you will…!"

The moment Sora heard that voice, the door began to glow. And then, surrounded by the light, Sora vanished from the cave.

When he came to, it was in another of the same marble halls. Naminé stood in the center of the room as if she'd been waiting for him.

"Naminé!" He ran to her and she smiled.

They were quiet for a moment until Sora spoke again. "Naminé… It's not you. The person who's most special to me…isn't you, is it?"

"…No." Naminé shook her head, a tiny movement. "The one you really care about—the one who was always with you… It's not me. It's someone else."

Sora looked down.

Someone else—that girl.

But I can't remember her.

I know she was really, really important to me, but I just can't remember.

"Who…is she?" Sora mumbled. "I can't think of her name. If she's so special to me, why can't I remember?"

Naminé shook her head again sadly. "Because I went into your memories and __"

"Let *me* explain this." A low voice interrupted Naminé's, sonorous against the marble.

“Riku!”

With that cold expression, this was practically a different person from the Riku he’d met on the island.

“Plain and simple,” he went on. “Your memory is a train wreck. You’re not the one who’s meant to protect Naminé. That’s me! But here you are, getting led astray by all those false memories!”

Riku lunged for him.

“No! Stop it!” Naminé screamed.

Sora grunted and blocked Riku’s blow with the Keyblade.

“*I’m* the one who will protect Naminé!” Riku jumped back and then went for Sora again, his sword swinging with renewed momentum.

“C’mon, Riku! We don’t have to do this!” Sora shouted, but Riku knocked him back hard.

“Sora!” cried Naminé.

“*Ngh.*.. Riku…” Leaning on the Keyblade like a crutch, Sora tried to get up, but the strength was gone from his legs.

“Looks like I win.” Riku closed in on him and raised his sword, smiling.

“Riku, don’t!”

He ignored Naminé’s protests and swung. “You’re through, you impostor!”

“NO!” With Naminé’s shout, brilliant light filled the room.

Riku made a small sound in pain and staggered.

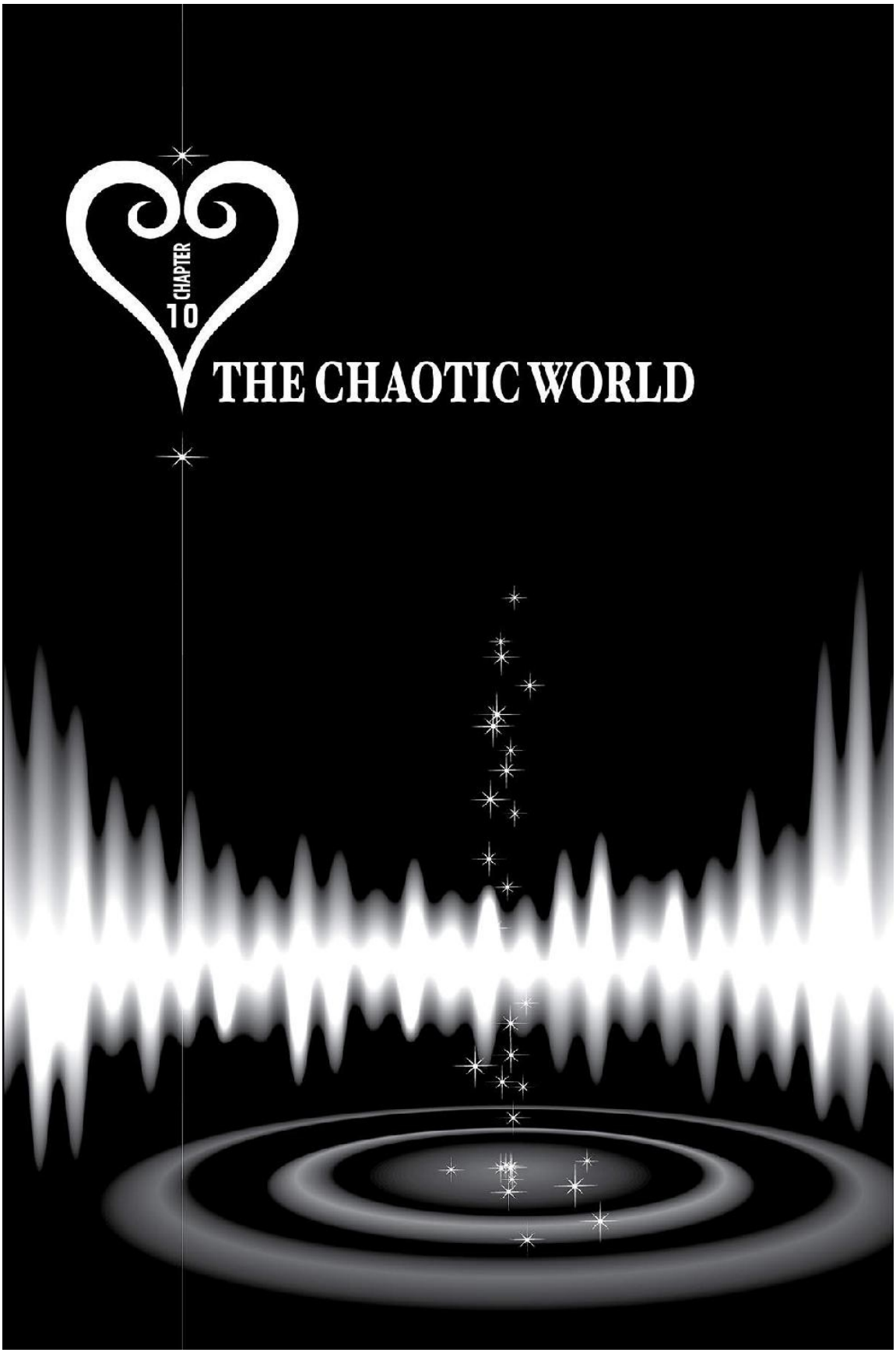
Sora made himself get up somehow and looked up at him. “Riku…?”

Riku took two or three unsteady steps and then sank to the floor.

“Riku! *Riku!*” Sora rushed to help him up—but Riku’s eyes were open and unseeing. He wasn’t there.

“RIKU!!”

Sora’s cries echoed on the cold marble walls.


CHAPTER
10
THE CHAOTIC WORLD

CHAPTER 10

THE CHAOTIC WORLD

Something I can do. Something I have to do.

I was wrong, wasn't I?

You know, Sora… I'm glad we got to see each other.

WITH THE FALLEN RIKU IN HIS ARMS, SORA GLARED AT Naminé. “What did you do? What did you do to him?!”

It must have been something she did. He couldn’t see any other possibility. What kind of power did she have…?

Naminé stood there as if Sora’s glare pinned her to the spot.

Another voice rang out instead. Startled, she turned.

It was Larxene. “Broke his heart. More like she smashed it, really.”

Broke his heart? thought Sora. *What does that mean?*

He laid Riku gently down on the floor. “Then—then, what’s gonna happen to him?!” he demanded aloud.

“Ha-ha! You’re so much fun to watch! If it’s Riku you’re worried about—well, no need for that. Riku was never really here, you see.”

“What d’you mean?!”

Of course Riku’s here. No matter how many memories I’ve lost, there’s no way I could mistake someone else for him. Glowering, Sora held the Keyblade ready.

Larxene giggled at him. “Oh, you think I’m just gonna *tell* you? That’s too easy! My, my, what to do!”

“Enough with the games!” Unable to stand it anymore, he attacked, but she easily sidestepped.

He had a terrible feeling about this…

“All right, fine, have it your way. I know it’ll just kill you to hear this…but I can live with that.” Larxene turned completely serious and took a step closer. “That thing lying there is just a puppet Vexen made as an experiment. No more than a toy. It’s laughable, really. It called you an impostor, but *it* was the fake all along.”

“Not Riku? A fake?!”

Riku had seemed strange from the start here—that was true. But a fake…?

But Riku knew about the promise. Nobody else besides Riku could know that.

Wait… Who’s the most special to me?

Didn’t Riku say something about a promise somewhere?

When we closed that door, I promised him something.

“Take care of her, Sora.”

Of whom? Who was that about?

I don’t know. I can’t remember.

“A fake in every possible way! It was only finished recently. How could it remember anything? It doesn’t have a past! Get it? Its memories with Naminé

were just planted, not real. Meaning all this time, it's been picking fights with you over memories—counterfeit, trumped-up, completely bogus memories! Isn't that the truth, Naminé?" Grinning, Larxene turned to her. "So cute, and you do such awful things!"

Naminé hung her head. Sora murmured her name, but she didn't reply.

"You're so stupid," Larxene sighed. "Haven't you caught up yet? *That's* what Naminé's powers are! She can go into people's hearts, rearrange their memories—even make up new ones of things that never happened at all! The girl you've been trying to protect all this time is really a witch who shackles people's hearts to fake memories!"

Naminé, the girl who was always drawing. Who watched Riku and me fighting with a smile on her face.

The night of the meteor shower…I did make that promise to her, I did.

Sora swallowed. "Then…my memories…are all…"

"Oh, you do get it!" Larxene crowed. "Lies, lies, all lies! Just Naminé's illusions! The perfect trap to bind you with the chains of memory!"

No… My memories with Naminé are all lies?

"It makes me tingle to think how easily you were duped! So close—we were almost there. This was our only chance to turn the Keyblade master into our puppet! But that—that jerk Axel—he used Naminé and betrayed us!" Larxene spat viciously and stalked toward Sora.

Everyone's just been getting in the way, she thought. *The Keyblade master, Axel, Naminé—they're all just getting in our way. Why do they want to screw up all our plans?*

All we want is…

Larxene showed her knives between her fingers.

"Don't!" Naminé moved in front of her, arms spread wide.

"Oh?" Larxene raised her eyebrows and stared close into Naminé's face. "Why, it's a little late for the witch to be growing a conscience. Last I checked, *you're* the one who messed around with his memories and brought him here!"

"I know—but—"

"I should tell you, I'm in a *very* foul mood. Thanks to you, all our plans are ruined!" A high slap echoed in the hall, and Naminé went tumbling to the floor.

Holding her cheek, she glared up at Larxene.

"Naminé!" Sora cried.

Larxene looked down her nose at him and took another step closer. "What's this? Are you upset? You don't even actually know her!"

“Maybe not. But still… I made a promise.” Sora adjusted his grip on the Keyblade and stared right back. “I promised Naminé that I’d keep her safe! And even if my memories are fake, the promise is real to me. That’s why…I’m going to keep it.”

The Keyblade glowed in his hands.

“You’re such an idiot. There *is* no promise and there never was! You’re just delusional!”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m still keeping my promise to Naminé!”

“Insisting on playing the hero? Whatever. If that’s the way you want it…then you’re going down alone!” Larxene shouted, poised to attack. But just as she raised her hands to strike, someone jumped into the way, knocking her back.

Two someones.

“Not if we have anything to say about it!”

There was no mistaking that voice. “Donald?!”

Sora had left them behind back on the previous floor—but Donald and Goofy were here.

“You’re not goin’ anywhere alone!”

“Goofy! You guys found me!” Sora ran in between them and grinned for what felt like the first time in a while.

“’Course we did! We were worried about ya,” said Goofy with a glare at Larxene.

“And we promised, too! We promised we’d protect you!” Donald held his wand high.

“Right, and we wouldn’t leave you alone. It’s always been the three of us, and we’re stickin’ together!” Goofy turned to wink at Sora. Sora smiled back, just a little.

They may have had a fight, but it wasn’t enough to drive them apart. No matter what, the three of them would always stick together.

“Fine with me! The more pain, the merrier!” Larxene’s knives sliced through the air toward the trio.

“Naminé! Get back!” Donald shouted, and beside him Goofy knocked aside the knives with his shield.

“Take care of Riku!” Sora told her.

“Right!” Naminé did her best to drag Riku out of the way to the corner of the hall.

After seeing they were safe, Sora brandished the Keyblade at Larxene. “Okay, now!”

“Doesn’t matter how many of you there are. You’ll never beat me!” She seemed to glide on the air, dancing weightless around the hall.

“Sora!” Goofy called.

“Got it!” Sora leaped after her and swung the Keyblade, and—“Where’d she go?!”

Larxene had vanished right in front of his eyes.

“Waaak!” At the same time across the room, Donald quacked in alarm.

“Donald?!” Sora turned to see Donald running in circles, dodging a barrage of knives.

Goofy leaped in and the knives bounced off his shield. “Over here!” he yelled, only for Larxene to smirk and vanish again.

“*Wak!* Now where is she?!” Donald glanced all around—but behind him in a corner, Larxene raised her hands.

“I’ll have you all charred to a crisp! *Thunder!*”

And bolts of lightning blazed throughout the room.

“…Ngh!” Between the thunderbolts, Sora rushed at Larxene, batting knives away with the Keyblade.

“Hmph. Well I’ve got *plenty* of knives!” She tossed more, and one sliced Sora’s cheek.

“Sora! Ya can’t beat her that way!” cried Goofy.

“But…what do we do?” said Sora.

“Same as we always do!” Donald replied.

The same as always…? What do we always do? How have we been fighting all this time? I can’t remember—

“You really think I’d lose to a bunch of brats like you?” Larxene raised her hands once more.

“SORA!” Donald and Goofy both shouted and ran in opposite directions.

Just like we always do—fighting together!

“Donald! Goofy! Here we go!” In the next breath, Sora dashed in under Larxene’s guard.

“You just don’t learn, do you?” She tossed more knives at him and disappeared.

“Blizzaga!” Donald shouted from behind him.

Larxene’s shriek echoed in the hall.

“We’re not gonna get knocked around forever!” Goofy ran up behind Larxene and butted her with his shield. She let out a short cry and went flying.

“Take this!” Sora was there to bring the Keyblade down on her. “See? If

we’re standing apart but fighting together, there’s nowhere for you to go!”

Larxene fell to her knees. “This…can’t be happening…”

“It sure is!” Donald ran to Sora’s side.

Goofy followed. “We’ve been fightin’ all sorts of bad guys like this—together!”

“No… No! I refuse to lose to a bunch of losers!” She glared at the faces of the trio surrounding her, one after another. “I’m…I’m fading? No, this isn’t…the way I… I won’t…”

But before she could even finish her sentence, Larxene faded into nothing. The only thing left was a single card.

Sora wordlessly picked it up. Donald and Goofy leaned closer to look at it.

“Hard to tell what’s on it…,” said Donald. The picture didn’t seem to show much besides a white mist.

“Never mind that—Naminé!” Sora exclaimed, exchanging nods with his companions, then went to the corner where Naminé was hiding.

Goofy spoke first. “So you’re Naminé, huh?”

“That’s right.” She nodded with a faint smile.

“*Ahyuck.* It’s good to meet ya! We’re Sora’s friends—”

“Goofy and Donald,” she finished for him, looking at each one as she said their names.

Donald laughed. “Yeah! But how did you know that?”

Goofy turned to Sora. “Congratulations, Sora! You finally found your friend. We sure are happy for ya!”

Naminé was his friend—but…still…

“What’s the matter, Sora?” asked Donald.

“Naminé…,” said Sora. “Can you tell us what really happened?”

“Okay.” Naminé looked down for a moment, and then up at each one of them in turn, and began. “I took the people and the memories inside Sora’s heart, and little by little…I replaced them with false memories.”

Goofy cocked his head. “Gawrsh, what do you mean?”

“I can rewrite people’s memories. That’s how…” Naminé frowned, uncertain how to go on.

“Then…what about Sora’s promise?” said Donald.

She shook her head. “Made up. It was fake. Sora never really promised me anything. Me being with him on the islands—that was a lie, just like everything else. I was never Sora’s friend…”

She trailed off, and Sora finished her thought. “And you were never the most

special to me, either…”

It wasn’t Naminé. Then, who is the one who’s really special to me?

“No. You see, in your true memories, I was never there at all.”

There was a pause, into which Jiminy Cricket hopped from Sora’s pocket. “So, that must mean it’s been your magic making the rest of us lose our memories, too. Is there any way for us to get ’em back?”

Naminé looked at them again. “Not right away…but…if we go to the thirteenth floor, I can fix everything.”

“The thirteenth floor? What floor are we on now?” Donald tapped his head, thinking. “I think…the tenth maybe?”

“Then, we only have to go up three more stories!” said Goofy, trying to cheer them up.

“But Marluxia—he…,” Naminé started.

“Marluxia?” Sora echoed. That was a name he’d heard before.

“He controls everything in Castle Oblivion,” she said glumly.

Jiminy folded his arms. “So, was he the fella who made you tamper with all of our memories?”

“If I didn’t obey, he said, I’d be locked in this castle forever… And I’ve been alone for so long…” Naminé’s eyes shone with tears.

“So, ya did what he said because you were lonesome?” Goofy said, glum with sympathy.

Maybe if you went a long time being lonesome, you’d be glad for any friends you could get…even if they were bad guys. I might do the same thing if I was that lonesome.

When Goofy thought of it that way, he couldn’t blame her at all.

Naminé covered her face. Only a tiny voice came out. “I’m so sorry…”

Donald and Goofy looked at each other, uncertain what they could do.

Beside them, with his eyebrows drawn, Sora reached out and put his hand on Naminé’s shoulder. “Don’t be. Come on, no crying.”

He sounded determined, almost angry. Naminé looked up and wiped at her cheeks. “I know… I don’t really have any right to.”

“That’s not what I meant!” he said louder, taking her by the shoulders with both hands.

“…What?”

“It’s like this… I’m really not happy about you messing with my memories.” He let her go, the strength going out of him. “But, I mean…I can’t really get mad at you for it, either.”

He paused, and quiet fell over them.

I can't get mad at her—not now. The memory of making that promise to her is still in my heart.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Even if it was really that other girl in his memories—that red-haired girl who came to him in an illusion on Destiny Island—he still couldn't blame Naminé.

Not when he remembered their promise *so* clearly…

"The memories you gave me… In my head, I know they're lies, but they still feel true. Like that promise I made. I said I would protect you. That promise is still in my heart."

The night of the meteor shower. The sandy beach. The soft sound of the waves…

"And when you cry, it feels like it must be my fault. So please…don't cry, don't apologize. Just smile for me until I get my memories back."

"Sora…" Her face was still wet with tears, but she gave him a tiny smile. He returned it.

"Oh, brother. This is too much," said Donald, tapping one webbed foot.

"It's okay. Sora always gets like this whenever he's around a girl!" Goofy shrugged and made an exaggerated sigh.

"Aw, cut it out! Can't you guys forget stuff like that?!" Scowling, Sora turned to them.

"Too bad. Good friends don't forget the good stuff!" Donald grinned.

"C'mon, guys…" Sora pouted. Then, he heard laughter.

Behind him, Naminé was quietly laughing.

"There! Just like that," said Sora.

"Huh?" She looked confused now.

"That's the Naminé I remember! It made me really happy when you smiled. I guess that was only in my fake memories, but…that feeling is real now."

"Thanks." She smiled again sweetly.

Getting bashful, Sora turned back to the others and held the Keyblade high. "Okay. Let's go!"

"Oh, boy! I can't wait to get our memories back!" Donald jumped.

"If Marluxia is gonna be there, maybe you'd better stay down here, Naminé," said Goofy.

"Yeah." Sora nodded. "And will you look after Riku? We'll come get you when it's over."

“Okay,” Naminé agreed.

Jiminy Cricket hopped back into his place in Sora’s pocket.

“All right. Here we go!” Donald ran ahead, waving his wand. Goofy and Sora followed.

“Please be careful, Sora,” Naminé called after him.

He looked back at her. “I’ll be okay—I promise!”

“…If you promise, Sora!”

He gave her a grin and ran up the stairs, holding up the card.

Through the door, a world of strange, bright colors opened up before them.

Donald glanced around and then cocked his head. “*Wak!* We’ve been here before!”

“I get that feeling, too,” said Sora. The floor felt squishy and unsteady, and Heartless were creeping toward them.

“Thundaga!” With a blast of Donald’s magic, the Heartless vanished all at once. He puffed his chest out. “Heh. That takes care of that!”

“Let’s keep going!” Goofy ran to the next door. The other two were close behind him.

This time, it was a bright sandy beach with a blue ocean washing against it.

“*Ahyuck?* Gee, I’ve never been to this place.” Goofy stopped short at the entrance.

Up the beach, palm trees swayed in the breeze.

“This…is our island,” Sora murmured.

“Er…what was it called again?” said Donald.

Sora looked sad as he replied, “Destiny Island.”

“Looks like a nice place…,” Goofy said cheerfully. “But we never came here together.”

“Then that means…we’re probably just wandering around in my memories.”

The room before and then this room. Both different worlds. So this floor was made up of a bunch of different worlds jumbled together.

“So we finally get to see your home, Sora!” Donald started to run down the beach.

Sora watched him a moment and took the good luck charm out of his pocket.

It had been a pendant made from a paopu fruit. But now it was different, something made from seashells. And yet the one he remembered Naminé giving him was definitely a paopu fruit…

Goofy peered at the pendant in Sora’s hand. “Huh. Did that lucky charm

always look like that?"

"I'm not sure."

When Sora closed his eyes, the red-haired girl's face came to him. *That girl… the one whose name I can't remember.*

"Who was it? Who's the most special to me? ……Nothing." Sora sighed heavily.

"Ya can't remember?" Goofy asked him anxiously.

"No. I only remember Naminé… Even though it must've been the other girl who gave me this. But I can't remember her."

Donald came closer, splashing through the shallow waves. "What's the matter?" he asked, though he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"C'mon, do you guys remember anything at all?" said Sora, practically begging.

"Umm…" Donald frowned, concentrating, then he hung his head. "Nope. Sorry, Sora."

"We're supposed to be lookin' for a friend who's real important to us, too," Goofy added. "But I just can't remember."

"Oh…"

There are memories Donald and Goofy lost, too…the memories of our friends. The important things we came to find.

"Actually, I'm getting kinda scared," Donald admitted very quietly. The sound of the waves rushed on between them in the stillness.

"Then, we really should make a promise!" said Goofy, trying to break the dismal mood.

"Huh?" Sora looked up.

"What you said back there, it kinda got my brain a-thinkin'. When you make a promise, and you decide you're gonna keep it no matter what…maybe it gives you the courage to face the scary stuff!"

"Courage…?" Sora mumbled.

My promise to Naminé… My promise to that girl… I made it this far because I've been trying to keep my promise.

"Yeah! Good thinkin'!" said Donald with a jump. "But what should we promise?"

"*Ahyuck.* That's easy! Even if we get scared, or we're in trouble, or even if we get split up… Or even if we sorta forget each other…" Smiling, Goofy held out his hand.

Looking up at him, Sora nodded and put his hand over Goofy's. "Whatever

happens, we're friends."

Donald added his hand, too. "All for one and one for all!"

No matter what happens…even if we get separated, even if we can never see each other again…we're friends forever.

"Even if one of us gets lost… So the three of us will always be together."

"Huh?" Sora heard that voice from somewhere. He looked around—but there was no one else to be seen besides Donald and Goofy.

Maybe it was just the waves…

The blue sea lapped at the shore.

"What's wrong, Sora?" asked Donald.

"It's nothing. C'mon, guys, let's go!" Sora ran across the beach.

Back in the hall, Naminé softly sat down beside Riku, who was still lying on the floor, and touched his hair.

A fake Riku made by us, the fakes…

His memories written and rewritten so many times. A poor puppet only made to be used.

Maybe we're still better off compared to him…

"Naminé."

She looked up. "…Marluxia."

It was him—the one in charge of Castle Oblivion.

"Come along, Naminé." He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet.

"But—but Riku…"

"Don't you worry about that worthless puppet." Marluxia barely glanced at Riku before leaving, still holding Naminé by the arm.

The trio went farther, easily fighting their way through the Heartless that appeared. The next room was the deck of a ship and the one after that a forest of big green lily pads—all definitely worlds that they had visited inside the castle.

But the memories of those places were faded and vague. They could hardly remember at all.

All they knew was that in each place, they'd made friends. And even if they lost those memories, their friends would still be their friends.

Just knowing that made it all right. They could keep going.

"Hyah!" Sora swung the Keyblade down on a Heartless.

It's okay—my friends are still here, even though I'm losing my memories. That's why we'll be all right.

Marluxia walked up through the stories, dragging Naminé with him. There was the big room that served as the entrance hall to the twelfth floor.

She'd left her sketchbook in the room with the crystal ball. She closed her eyes and imagined a scene.

I wonder where Sora is now?

All the worlds inside Castle Oblivion—I lost control of them and they're getting jumbled together. I hope he doesn't get lost…

But if he isn't lost, then he has to be coming to this hall soon… The thought made Naminé's face cloud over with worry. *And if he can't defeat Marluxia, he won't be able to get his real memories back…*

"How've you been, Marluxia?"

Hearing the new voice, Naminé opened her eyes again. Axel stood there smirking.

"You have some nerve to show your treasonous face around here." Marluxia let go of Naminé to give him a deadly glare. "Some nerve!"

"Treasonous? Whatever do you mean?" Axel replied breezily.

"Why would you let Naminé go?! If it weren't for you and your needless meddling, the Keyblade master would already be ours to command!" Marluxia shook a fist at him.

"Oh, right, your big plan. Use Naminé's powers to rewrite Sora's memories little by little and make him into Naminé's lapdog, so you're controlling Sora through her. And then, along with Larxene, you take over the organization. Am I right? I've got news for you, Marluxia—that makes you the traitor."

Just as Axel said, Marluxia had been scheming to betray the organization.

Organization XIII. A bunch of Nobodies.

"But you—you destroyed Vexen!" cried Marluxia, flinging his arm out in a wild gesture.

"Yeah, I got rid of him. What about it? All I did was eliminate one of us who failed to serve the organization's purpose. Oh, and I had to make you trust me."

Axel grinned, but his eyes glinted with a viciously cold light.

"So, this whole time, your only goal was to gain proof of our plot… Is that it, then?" Marluxia sounded resigned.

"Well…you did give that order yourself. 'You must eliminate the traitor.'" Axel spread his arms—and then, in each hand, he held a round spiked chakram. "And I always follow orders, Marluxia."

"Hmph. If only that were true," Marluxia sniffed.

“Larxene paid the price for her disloyalty. And so will you. In the name of the organization, I will annihilate you.”

“You can try!” Marluxia snarled and took Naminé by the arm once more, dragging her in front of him.

“Is that your shield? Won’t do you much good. I don’t mind eliminating her as well.” Axel brandished his chakrams. “Ready for real oblivion, Marluxia?”

“Hmph… We’ll see about that. Are you listening, Sora?”

Naminé stood taller, trying to see—and it was Sora and his friends who came dashing in.

“Oh?” Axel lowered his weapons.

“Axel says he’s willing to harm Naminé to get to me,” Marluxia shouted. “But you won’t let that happen, will you?!”

“…Axel!” Holding the Keyblade ready, Sora glared.

“Oh, come on now. You’re Marluxia’s puppet already?” Axel turned to face him, unhurried, with a mocking shrug.

“You think so? After I finish you, he’s next!”

“Heh… Look, Sora, we’ve got more of a connection than you might think. I’d rather not fight you, but…I can’t let myself look bad here!”

Axel raised his chakrams again and leaped into the air, and Sora blocked his strike with the Keyblade.

“Blizzaga!” Donald flung a spell at him, but Axel jumped back to avoid the blast of ice by a hair’s breadth.

“Why don’t you just take care of one another, then…” Still holding Naminé, Marluxia disappeared with her.

Axel raised one eyebrow. “*Tch.*.. He got away. —Well, Sora, let’s see what you can do!”

He moved toward Sora in slow, even steps, as if trying to lure him to rush in.

“You don’t have to tell me!” Sora jumped up. Behind him, Donald had his wand ready.

The impact clanged through the Keyblade up Sora’s arms.

“Hmm? Is that all?” Axel knocked him aside.

“Here goes!” Spinning around, Goofy moved in.

“Oh, you’ll burn!” Axel shot out flames, and a wall of fire rushed toward Goofy.

Donald was there to counter it. *“Blizzaga!”* Great chunks of ice launched at the wall of fire—but didn’t douse it.

“*Aaah-hoooey!* Ow-ow-ow!” The fire seemed to chase Goofy around.

“Donald! You help Goofy!” Sora shouted and hurtled through the flames to get in range of Axel.

“You’ve got a ways to go…” Blocking Sora’s attack, Axel gave him a cocky grin. “It’s funny. You really have nothing on him.”

“Him…?” Sora echoed.

Axel pushed him aside and laughed. “There’s plenty more up my sleeves for you! Take this!”

The chakrams were wreathed in fire as he flung them at the trio.

“I know! Donald!” Sora ran to him and whispered in his ear.

“Wak?”

“We did it when we beat Vexen, didn’t we?” Sora raised the Keyblade high. “Here goes, Donald!”

“All right!”

Sora threw the Keyblade like a boomerang.

“Blizzaga!” Donald flung the spell at the spinning Keyblade, surrounding it in ice crystals.

“*Ya-hoooey!* Here I come!” Goofy hurled himself after the Keyblade.

“Oh?” Axel held the chakrams ready out in front of him to block, but the ice-covered Keyblade spun and knocked them from his hands. In the next instant, Goofy was there to crash into him with his shield.

“…Ngh!”

“Axel—!” The Keyblade returned to his grasp and Sora jumped at him.

Stunned by the blow, Axel fell to his knees. “…Not so bad after all.”

“We did it!” Donald pounced on Sora.

“Well, you’re better than I thought. It was worth saving you after all.” Axel smirked even as he slumped to the floor.

“Saving me? What d’you mean?”

“Sorry, I’d hate to kill the suspense.”

“Axel!” Sora shouted, but he was already fading—though the smile on his face didn’t.

Then Axel was gone, leaving only a single card behind.

“…Saving me?” Sora repeated as he picked up the card.

How did Axel save me?

What connection do I have with that guy?

And who else was he talking about?

Axel only kept saying things that made no sense…

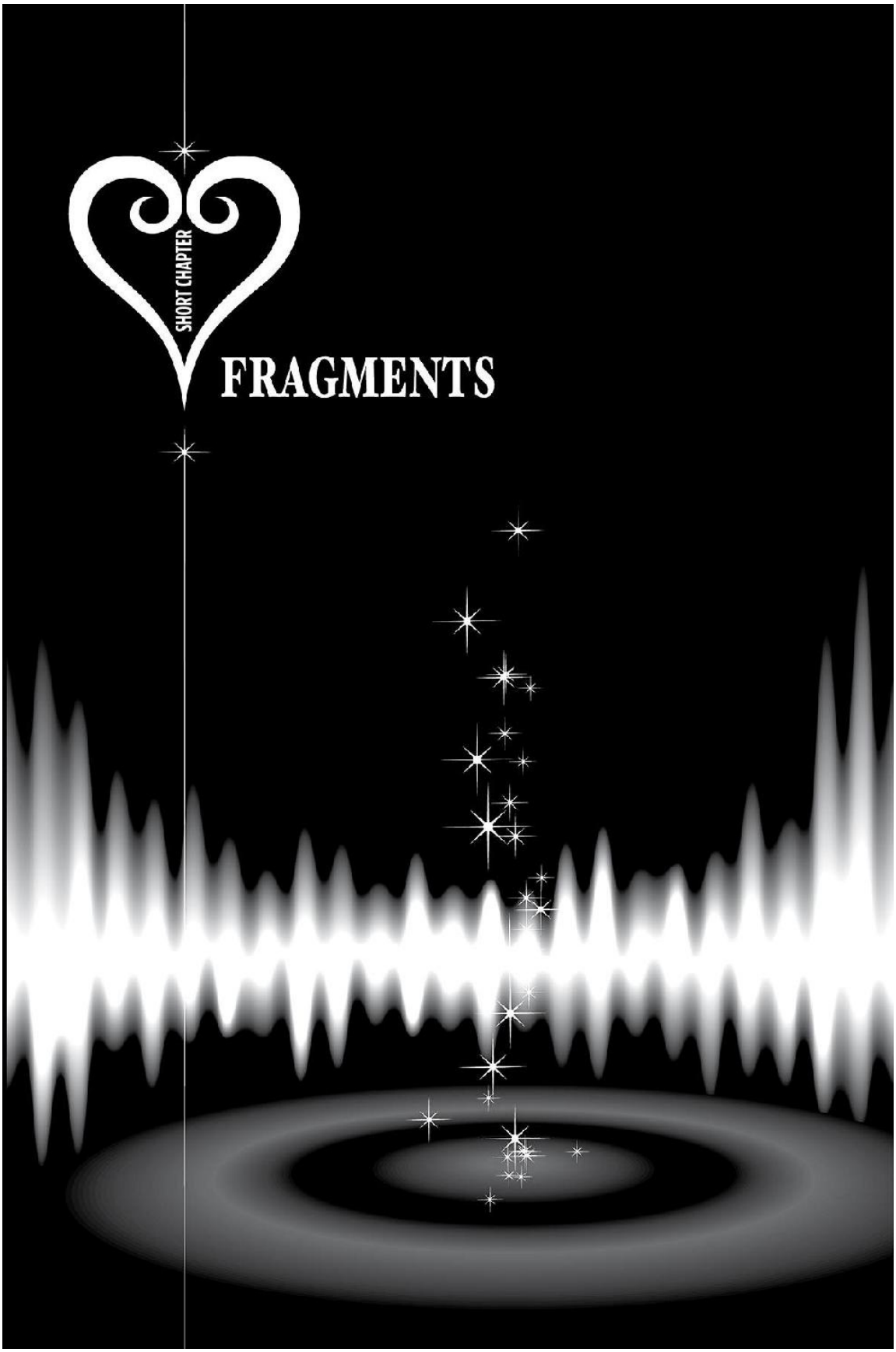
“C’mon, let’s keep movin’,” said Goofy, while Sora was lost in thought.

“We gotta help Naminé!” Donald waved his wand around for emphasis.

“Oh. Right… We better go.”

I have to save Naminé…and get my memories back.

The image on the card was this very castle itself. Sora climbed the stairs and held the card up to the door.


SHORT CHAPTER
FRAGMENTS

SHORT CHAPTER

FRAGMENTS

THE ROOM LAY FAR UNDERGROUND IN THE BOWELS OF Castle Oblivion.

In that place ruled by gloom and shadow was a single man, his face half hidden behind long bangs. His name was Zexion. Number 6 in the organization.

"What's going to become of the organization…?" he murmured.

In reply, another appeared in the room—Axel, whom Sora thought he'd just defeated.

"Naminé's betrayed you. Sora eliminated Larxene." Smirking, he approached Zexion. "The question is which one of us will be next to fall."

"…It might be you."

"Me? I doubt that." Axel folded his arms. "You see, just before I got here, I pretended that Sora beat me to a pulp enough to make me disappear. So, I won't be fighting him again, at least for a bit."

"For a bit…?"

Zexion nearly asked what that was supposed to mean but held his tongue. There was no need to ask *him* questions.

"Which means," said Axel, "the next to fall will be Marluxia."

"Sora beat you, so there's no way he'll lose against Marluxia—is that what you think?"

Marluxia might be in charge of the castle, but he was still only number 11. And Axel, as number 8—despite being on good terms with Marluxia—saw him as a lower-ranking opponent for Sora.

Of course, their assigned numbers in the organization did not directly correspond to strength. What had happened to Vexen was proof enough of that.

"I'm saying that Marluxia tried to use Sora to take over the organization, and Sora will be the one to eliminate him."

So it's no longer necessary to compete with Marluxia, who tried to take possession of the hero of light, thought Zexion. *Then, what should we do with the*

hero of darkness who is in our hands now?

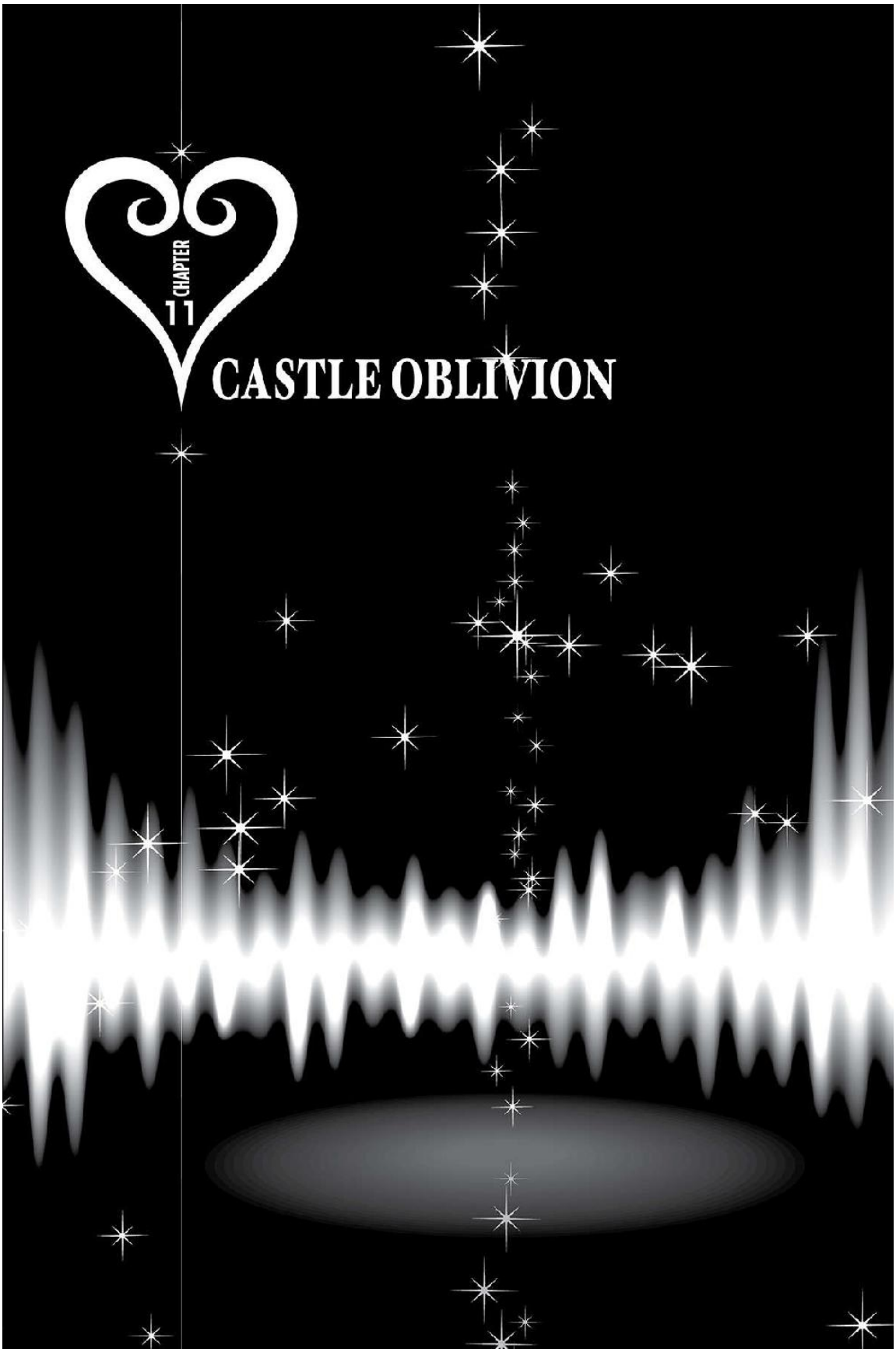
"Then…our reason for obtaining Riku is no longer valid."

"Are you saying we'll have to dispose of him?" said Axel. "You want to go up against Riku after he took down Lexaeus?"

They'd already lost three members of the organization here in Castle Oblivion. They ought to avoid losing any more. Naturally, he had no intention whatsoever of fighting Riku.

"I'll do things differently," Zexion replied with a slight smile and went on to tell Axel of a certain important matter.

He wouldn't have to get his hands dirty. He could finish this from a distance.


CHAPTER
11
CASTLE OBLIVION

CHAPTER 11

CASTLE OBLIVION

Maybe it would be easier if I lost my memory.
But…if I do, I'll forget Sora. That would be even sadder.

I did the same thing to Sora.
Sora… I'm sorry.
Riku… Forgive me.
This is my crime…and my punishment.

I'm no one… I'm her shadow.

Even while he—while Marluxia has me by the arm, I'm praying.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR, THE HALL STRETCHED on, looking much the same.

"So this is what the castle really looks like, huh?" said Donald, even as he destroyed some Heartless that came for them.

One appeared right in front of Goofy and he yelped, jumping back.

"These are different from the ones we've fought before!" shouted Sora as he brought the Keyblade down on them.

They looked like Shadows, the weakest kind of Heartless, but not quite the same shape, and the way they attacked wasn't the same, either. Quite a lot of them appeared, but they each moved differently.

"There's something weird about 'em…" Donald whacked a rather meek Heartless over the head.

It was hard to say exactly what was different about them, but…

"Hey. What are the Heartless, anyway?" Donald wondered after they'd defeated all of them.

"What are they…? Gawrsh… Didn't somebody tell us once?" Goofy said with his head cocked to one side. "Sora, d'you remember?"

Sora shook his head. They'd forgotten so much—even important things. But he'd never thought much about what Heartless really were. "We better just get rid of them and keep going."

"I guess so…" Goofy seemed like he had more he wanted to say.

"Let's go." But even as he urged them on, Sora stood there confused, feeling a haze come over his mind.

This isn't the time to think about stuff like that… Marluxia has Naminé. And we don't know what happened to Riku. Actually…if the Riku here isn't the real one, where is the real Riku?

Blue sky. White sand.

Riku stood surrounded by the sound of the waves.

The world he knew as home—the Destiny Islands.

Back then, he'd wanted to leave it behind. But now he missed it so badly he could hardly stand it.

I've been alone since I left the islands.

But that's how I know—even if I have to keep going alone, I'll be all right.

"Riku! You're not alone!"

It was King Mickey who told him that—but the king wasn't here with him now.

How long do I have to walk this path by myself? Maybe I'll always be alone…

Riku ran up the beach. Almost like in those days.

Sora…where are you?

No matter how far they went, all the rooms looked the same—as if they weren't moving at all. But Marluxia might be in here somewhere.

"This castle is huge!" Donald complained.

"We've come up twelve stories, so there can't be much more," Sora replied and resolutely kept walking.

"*Ahyuck!* Right." Goofy followed, still in good spirits. "Y'know, Sora…"

"What is it, Goofy?"

"Losin' memories is kinda scary, but it's not really all that bad, huh?"

Sora stopped in his tracks. "Yeah, it is! We were on a quest, and we don't even remember what for!"

"But the three of us are still goin' around together. That part didn't change."

Goofy wasn't wrong. Even with their memories missing, they could still keep going. They still had their feelings.

Maybe that was better than being manipulated by false memories.

"Sora, do you remember?" asked Donald.

"Remember what?"

"Our promise!"

"'Course I do! Even if we get scared, or we're in trouble, or even if we get split up, or forget each other—we're friends no matter what."

"Then, even if you forget 'em—your friends are still your friends!" Donald told him cheerfully.

"I guess… But I still don't want to. I'd rather remember them!"

People who were special to him… His friends… He wanted to remember all of them.

"Yeah, well—same here!" Donald frowned. "But what happens when we get our memories back?"

"What do you mean? They'll just be back, right?" said Sora, but that didn't seem to be any comfort to Donald.

Our memories will go back to the way they were before. So I'll be like I was before I came here…? Then, what about everything that happened inside the castle?

"We gotta remember what we were lookin' for on our journey," Goofy added.

He was right again. This wasn't the time to be overthinking things.

They had to help Naminé—and remember what they were searching for. There was no other way to keep going.

Sora started walking forward again.

When they had gone through more white rooms than they could count, finally they came to a more spacious hall, where pillars towered and chandeliers of carved marble flowers hung from the ceiling.

"So, you've defeated Axel. I owe you my thanks, Sora."

Marluxia was waiting for them in the center of the hall, his grip still tight on Naminé's arm.

Sora stood ready to fight with the Keyblade. "Marluxia!"

He laughed under his breath. "The Keyblade's power. How I've longed to make it my own… And then I will control the organization!"

"Forget it! Let Naminé go!"

Behind Sora, Donald and Goofy held their weapons ready, too.

"Yeah! You better!"

"Ya shouldn't be so mean to girls!"

"Oh, but so long as I have her, you stand no chance of winning." Marluxia shoved her away from him and smirked. "Naminé, erase Sora's memory!"

Her eyes flew open and she turned to face him. "But if I do that—" Then, she looked at Sora and hung her head.

There's no way she'll do that…

"That's right," Marluxia crooned. "If you force out all the memories you planted there, his whole memory will be shattered—along with his heart. Just like that puppet."

Naminé glared up at him.

"The courage in your eyes is so charming—but you can't defy me. Who was it who took you in when you were so alone?"

Her narrow shoulders trembled.

"Well, I'd have preferred him in one piece, but he can be rebuilt—more to my liking with some time. Do it, Naminé. Erase his memory."

"…No." She stared straight at Marluxia, her voice unwavering. "Everything Sora knew about me was a lie. I deceived him and he forgave me. How could I destroy his heart?! I won't do it! I don't care what happens to me. I won't hurt Sora!"

"In that case…" Marluxia raised his hand.

“Do it, Naminé!” Sora cried. “I don’t care! You can erase my memory!”

“But—” Naminé looked at Marluxia and Sora in turn.

“Just do it! Erase my memories, destroy my heart—it doesn’t matter. I promised I’ll always protect you!”

I promised. I’ll keep my promise no matter what.

I’ll protect Naminé no matter what.

Even if my memory’s gone—it’ll be okay.

“Please, just trust me!” he yelled in earnest.

“Sora…” Naminé screwed up her face, her eyes filling with tears.

“I don’t need any memories to take on somebody like Marluxia!”

“That’s right! And even if Sora forgets it all, Goofy and I won’t forget!” Donald added, brandishing his wand.

“Uh-huh! Donald ’n’ me can remember everything for Sora!” Goofy winked at Naminé.

“See,” said Sora, “I’ll have all my friends’ memories, so I can piece my own together again!”

Marluxia snorted in derision. “Ignorant fool. When Naminé uses her powers to erase your memory, you’ll be nothing but an empty husk! Your heart will no longer feel or care about anything! Just like that pathetic imitation of your Riku!”

Another voice rang out. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Riku appeared with a dark flash and slashed out at Marluxia.

“It can’t be—!” Marluxia cried as he fell to his knees.

“Riku!” Sora ran to him.

He didn’t turn around to reply, “No. Just an imitation.”

He pointed his sword at Marluxia again.

“You’re a shell—a husk who had everything taken! Everything!”

“What did I ever have to lose in the first place? Both my body and my heart are fake. But there’s one memory I’ll keep—even if it was just a lie! Whether it was a phantom promise or not…I will protect Naminé!”

“Riku…!” Sora stood beside him and likewise held the Keyblade ready in front of Marluxia.

That determination to protect Naminé—it was the same feeling as Sora’s. So it didn’t matter whether this was the real Riku or not.

We only want to protect Naminé.

“Imbeciles…!” Marluxia got to his feet. “You would knowingly shackle your heart with a chain of memories born of lies? You would cast aside your heart’s

freedom?!”

Pale pink flower petals began to drift down, swirling into shape—until an enormous scythe materialized from them.

“You turn from the truth because your heart is weak… And you will never defeat me!” He swung the scythe at Sora and Riku.

“Ngh—!” Riku managed to block it. “Sora, now!”

At his cue, Sora leaped into the air to bring the Keyblade down on Marluxia’s head. But he raised the scythe in time to ward off the blow.

“That’s not all I’ve got!” Sora jumped up again. “Donald, Goofy!”

“Firaga!” Donald waved his wand, launching a huge fireball at Marluxia.

Goofy came running up behind him, shield out—only to find his vision obscured with pale pink.

“Hyuck?” He stood confused and a storm of flower petals tore through the hall.

“Look out!” Riku dove for Naminé, shielding her with his body, and picked her up to jump out of the way.

The flower storm extinguished Donald’s fireball and threw Sora and Goofy back against the wall.

“Ouch…” Sora somehow got back on his feet, but Marluxia was already there with his scythe. *“Augh!”*

“Sora!”

He went sprawling again. Goofy ran to his side and gave him a healing potion.

Riku left Naminé hidden behind a pillar and lunged at Marluxia, his sword aiming for the head. The scythe knocked his blow aside once more and flung Riku against the wall.

“I can’t even hit him…”

“You’re only a replica, after all… You’ll never strike a blow against me!”

Marluxia raised his hands and another flurry of pink petals filled the hall.

“Whoa!” Sora, Donald, and Goofy scrambled to take shelter behind pillars.

“How do we hit him?!” yelled Donald. The moment they tried, they’d be blown away by a flower storm.

“Don’t lose your cool—there has to be a way,” Riku murmured in reply. Then he charged at Marluxia. “Sora, now!”

“Wha…?”

“Trust me! C’mon!”

“Okay!” Sora hurtled after him.

Marluxia had only to wait for them to come into range before swinging that terrible scythe. A shock wave rang through the hall—but Riku blocked it. “What?!”

“Jump, Sora!”

At Riku’s cue Sora jumped into the air and swung the Keyblade at Marluxia’s head.

“Donald! Let’s have some magic!” Riku called.

“Right— *Firaga!*” Donald chased Sora’s blow with a fireball.

“Goofy! This way!”

Goofy ran in to join Riku. Having knocked aside the Keyblade, Marluxia raised his scythe higher to ward off the fireball—and then Goofy was there. He rammed with his shield, leaving Marluxia’s defenses open.

“Sora! Now!”

Sora and Riku both launched themselves at Marluxia again, and both their weapons struck him at once.

As soon as Sora felt the impact in the Keyblade, Marluxia’s body turned to a cloud of flower petals—which whirled about and finally scattered.

“Is he…gone?” Goofy panted.

“Looks like it.” Sora grinned and gave Riku a high five.

Donald jumped in triumph. “We did it!”

“Now we can get our memories back!” Goofy smiled at Naminé, who came out from behind her pillar.

“No… Not yet.” She shook her head.

“She’s quite right. What you destroyed was only an illusion of me.”

In the back of the room in front of the big door, flower petals swirled together.

“Wak!” Donald fumbled and gripped his wand.

The petals coalesced into a humanoid shape—which became Marluxia.

“So what!” Riku rushed at him, swinging his sword, but Marluxia only disappeared in another cloud of petals.

“*Tch.* Another imitation!”

A single petal drifted down and turned into a card. The illustration on it was a riot of petals.

“I guess we have to use this to keep going… Does that mean the real Marluxia is through there?” Sora picked up the card and turned to Naminé.

“Yes,” she replied with a tiny nod.

“I knew it. I can feel his power…like it’s going to explode any minute.” Sora

looked at the door. Some terrible energy emanated from behind it—terrible enough that he wasn't sure they could win against it.

"Then, we gotta do something before it goes off!" said Goofy, though he sounded as cheerful as ever.

"Let's go, Sora!" Donald waggled his wand, impatient.

"Yeah…" Sora looked at Riku and Naminé. "Riku… You protect Naminé."

Riku lowered his sword and blinked. His voice came out small. "You don't… mind?"

Sora only smiled. "Should I?"

"All right." Riku turned to Naminé and nodded.

She looked at Sora, who had already turned to go. "Don't forget your promise."

"I know. I'll keep it!"

They had to beat Marluxia so Naminé could be free. And so they could get their memories back.

"Sora! C'mon!" said Goofy.

Sora nodded resolutely and held the card up to the door.

He ran and ran through the world of darkness.

I have to go. Quickly now. I promised I'd be there.

The card glowed faintly as he went.

He could see the light within the darkness. He had to keep sight of it.

Riku's there—I'm sure of it.

King Mickey kept running through the dark.

Through the door was a world of gloom.

Not darkness—but not light, either. Only a strange drifting space greeted the trio.

"Gawrsh, I wonder where Marluxia could be?"

The moment Goofy stepped inside, a torrent of flower petals swirled.

"This is the world of nothingness where all hearts cease to exist—and your hearts, too, will scatter and perish in the emptiness!"

Marluxia's voice rang out in the gray gloom. They stood ready to fight, facing down an enormous sort of winged mecha with two cruel scythes, in which Marluxia sat looking down over them, with outsized petals fluttering behind him.

"Waaak!" Donald flailed furiously. "A mecha?! That's not fighting fair!"

“Perhaps so—and you will learn what it means to defy me!” As Marluxia spoke petals scattered every which way.

“Ack!” Sora tried to dodge, but the petals were everywhere, and each one was as sharp as a tiny blade. He knocked them away with the Keyblade and ran in under Marluxia’s mecha—the Specter—and slashed out at its right-side scythe.

Metal struck metal and the scythe fell a little bit. Sora kept on attacking it.

“Hey, wait for me! *Blizzaga!*” Donald blasted his magic at both the scythes. *“Firaga! Thundaga!”*

He let out a barrage of sorcery. Behind him, Goofy used a healing potion.

“Take this.” The right scythe came down, and the shock wave knocked Sora back.

“Ouch…”

“You okay?!” Goofy dashed to Sora’s side and gave him a healing potion.

“Thanks, Goofy!” Sora jumped to his feet and got under the Specter again—only for it to float up out of reach.

“You fools—you can never understand our agony…!” The Specter dove.

“Wa-waaak!” Donald, still firing off spells, took a blunt hit from the mecha and fell back.

“Well, what do you know about Naminé and Riku?! They’re hurting, too!” Sora hopped onto the Specter while it was close to the ground and struck at Marluxia himself.

“Ngh…!”

“Sora! We broke the scythe!” Goofy called from below.

“What pathetic fools…”

“We’re smarter than you think!”

The great calyx petals that flared behind Marluxia detached and shot off like missiles.

“Wak!” Donald cried out from under the Specter, where Sora couldn’t see.

“Why, you…!” Sora jumped higher again to bring the Keyblade down on Marluxia. Petals swarmed to defend him.

Atop the Specter, the wind blew fiercely, and whirling pink petals obscured Sora’s vision. Marluxia stood with a cruel smile in the midst of the storm.

“If we had the power of the Keyblade…”

“Well, you won’t get it! I’m not gonna let you use me!” Sora dug the Keyblade into the mecha’s surface. “Donald! Goofy!”

At his call they leaped into the air.

“Let’s do this together!”

Donald and Goofy landed beside him, wand and shield at the ready—and a glow surrounded the trio.

"—What is this?!" Marluxia shielded his eyes. The Keyblade gave off a tremendous blaze of light.

The flower petals, the Specter, and Marluxia—all were swallowed up in the light.

"No—how can—ah, so this is the power of the Keyblade…!"

At last he faded away into the light.

"Did we get him?!"

As if the light was the only thing protecting them, when they fell back to the ground the gloomy world began to rumble. Not light nor darkness… A world of nothing at all, and it was making a terrible noise.

"We better get out of here!" shouted Donald.

In the distance they could see a faint swirl of light. "That way!" cried Sora, and they ran.

"D'you think we really beat him?" Goofy worried.

"That doesn't matter now—we gotta run!" Donald snapped.

"It's all right. We beat him." Sora looked at the Keyblade in his hand.

"The power of the Keyblade…" What did Marluxia and the others want with it? What was the organization trying to do?

"There's the way out!" Goofy jumped into the light. Donald followed and then Sora.

Behind them the world of nothingness was being washed over with blank white. A single flower petal drifted down, sparked into light, and then was gone.

"Sora!" Naminé cried as he practically fell through the door.

"Hi, Naminé." Sora smiled a little bashfully and looked back at the door. The Keyblade began to shine. "Huh?!"

It moved of its own accord to point at the door. Then, a beam of light shot from it and materialized into a Keyhole.

"What's going on?!" Donald shouted, and just then they heard a clicking sound—the Keyhole being locked. The light faded.

"Gawrsh, what was that…?" said Goofy.

Sora shrugged. "I don't know what's happening anymore, either."

Riku was next to Naminé. Sora went to him. "You okay, Riku?"

"I'm not Riku. I'm a fake. I can't remember why I was created or where or when… All that's inside of me is memories of you and Naminé." He shook his

head. “But I know they aren’t real.”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy looked at one another.

If he knew that he wasn’t the real Riku… Knowing for a fact that his memories were lies… That had to be awful.

“Say, Naminé, can’t you use your magic to get Riku’s memory back to normal?” Goofy wondered timidly.

“Well…I…,” she started, but then only hung her head miserably.

“It’s all right. I’ll deal.” Riku began to walk away.

“Wait!” Sora chased him. “Who cares if someone else made you? You’re you and nobody else. You have your own heart inside of you. Those feelings and memories are yours and yours alone. They’re special!”

Just like the memories I have of Naminé are still special… Those memories must be staying with him because they’re precious, too.

“You’re a good guy, Sora,” he said without looking back. “I don’t have to be the real Riku to see how real your feelings are. That’s enough for me.”

Riku made a small sound, and Sora couldn’t tell whether it was laughter or the opposite.

But…right now, it’s true that we’re friends, Sora thought. *There’s nothing false about my feelings.*

“Riku!”

When Sora called his name he only began to run…farther and farther away.

He murmured it again but didn’t try to follow. He could only watch Riku go.

After Riku ran out of the hall, he had no idea where to go. He only wanted to get away from that place where everyone else was *real*.

He stopped running and stared at his feet.

This body of mine is fake…and this feeling, too…

“Hey there, Riku.”

He looked up. “…Axel.”

“Say, don’t you want to become the real thing?” said Axel, smirking.

The real thing. The weight of truth he craved so badly.

Riku—the replica—silently nodded.

Sora stood again by Naminé’s side.

“So Riku left, huh…?” Goofy said sadly.

“Yeah.” Sora nodded and looked at Naminé. She seemed downhearted, too.

They’d defeated Marluxia and saved her, but she couldn’t be happy about it.

Donald broke the dismal silence. “Can we get our memories back?”

Naminé looked up. “Yes. Just because you can’t remember something doesn’t really mean that it’s gone.”

“What d’ya mean?” said Goofy, puzzled.

“When you remember one thing, another memory comes back with it, and then another and another, right? Our memories are connected. All those pieces are linked together like they’re in a chain…and that’s what keeps our hearts together. I don’t really erase any memories—I just take apart the links and rearrange them. So you still have all your memories.”

Jiminy Cricket popped out from Sora’s pocket and hopped down. “Then, you can put ’em back together?”

Memories linked together…, Sora thought. *But even though I remember that girl’s face, I still can’t remember her name. If it isn’t gone, why can’t I remember it?*

“I can…,” Naminé replied. “But first, I have to take apart the chains of the memories that I made. After that, I have to gather up the fragments of memories scattered across each of your hearts and reconnect them. It might take a while. But I think it’ll work.” Then her expression brightened. “No—it will work. I’m sure. It’s my turn to look after you.”

“Okay.” Sora smiled back. “We trust you!”

If she says so, we can believe her. The relief that washed over them was almost palpable.

But Jiminy hopped up high. “Oh—wait! You said you had to undo the links of the memories you made…”

“So? What about it?” Donald peered at his tiny worried face.

“Well, that means…”

“C’mon, Jiminy, you can spit it out,” Sora teased him.

“He’s right,” Naminé said quietly. “You won’t be able to remember anything about what happened here.”

“So—we’ll forget you?!”

“I’m sorry. It’s the only way.” She turned away, as if she didn’t want them to see her face anymore, and took a few steps. “You have a choice, Sora. You can lose your memories of this castle and reclaim your old ones…or keep your memories here and give up the precious memories you lost.”

“Do I have to…to choose?”

“Yes.”

He couldn’t see her face.

Still…there was only one answer. He'd already decided. "Make me like I was."

Naminé spun on her heels and gave him a smile.

But anyone could tell it wasn't a real smile.

"Okay. I know! Nobody wants to keep a bunch of memories that aren't real, right? You want to remember all of the people who are really important to you. That's what anyone would choose…" Her voice trailed off. They could barely catch her last words.

But we have to get our memories back… No matter what it takes.

EPILOGUE

XIII

I am her shadow…her darkness.
I will never be able to reach her.

But, Sora… Right now, in this moment, you and I are friends, aren't we?
No one wants false memories…
If this is what it comes to—no… I'm glad I met you, Sora.
So I'm not going to regret anything.

I wonder if we'll meet again. I'm pretty sure we will.

IN THE CORNER OF THE GREAT HALL, THERE WAS A little staircase.

"Does this go to the thirteenth floor?" asked Sora.

"Yes," Naminé's tiny voice replied, and she went up the stairs.

They went through more white rooms and finally came to a bigger door. When Naminé stood before it, the door opened without a sound.

"What is this place…?"

"A secret room." Naminé turned and smiled at them.

The room was filled with strange devices shaped like huge flower buds. Donald walked closer to one. "So…if we sleep in these things, our memories will come back?"

"It's going to take a little time. But I'll take care of you."

"Gawrsh…when we wake up, we won't remember who you are anymore." Goofy slumped over sadly.

"How are we gonna know to thank you, then?" said Donald, poking the pod.

"No need to worry about that!" Jiminy Cricket exclaimed, sticking his head out of Sora's pocket with a grin. "I'll just make a big note in my journal. And it'll say, 'Thank Naminé.'"

"That sure makes me feel better!" Donald smiled, too, and Naminé finally joined in.

But will that really work? Sora worried. *Didn't something happen to Jiminy's journal when we came into the castle?*

He shook his head, shaking the thoughts away. Naminé would make sure it was all right.

"Well, then… G'night, Naminé!" Goofy waved to her.

She nodded in return. "Good night, Goofy."

Donald and Goofy each settled themselves into a pod.

"You too, Sora!" Donald scolded.

"Okay, okay…" Sora went to the big flower bud thing in the middle of the room.

"All of this may have started with a lie," said Naminé, "but…I really am glad that I got to meet you, Sora."

He turned, smiling at her. "Yeah. Me, too."

It was still hard to believe that his memories with Naminé could be lies. But his feelings now were real.

"When I finally found you, and when I remembered your name…I was so happy," he told her. "The way I felt wasn't a lie."

She smiled back. "Good-bye."

“No, not good-bye!” He took a step closer to her. Determination came into his voice. “When I wake up, I’ll find you. And then there won’t be any lies. We’re gonna be friends for real. Promise me, Naminé.”

She shook her head. “You’re going to forget making that promise.”

That’s why this is good-bye, Naminé thought. *When you wake up, Sora, you’ll have forgotten all about me.*

“But even if the chain of memories comes apart, the links will still be there, right?” Sora insisted. “So the memory of our promise will always be inside me somewhere. I just know it.”

She wanted to believe him.

If anyone could remember her, Sora would—that much, she could believe.

“Okay…you’re right. It’s a promise.”

“Yeah!” Sora held out his pinkie finger to her. She linked it with her own.

“Promise, Sora?”

“I promise.”

Then he stepped into the pod. It felt warm inside…comforting. He was getting a little sleepy…

“Hey, Sora.”

“Hm?” His sight was going hazy.

“Some of your memories’ links are deep in the shadows of your heart, and I won’t be able to find all of them. But don’t worry… You made another promise to someone you could never replace.”

Naminé’s voice felt like a lullaby. Gentle…like the sound of the waves on the island.

“She is your light. The light within the darkness. Remember her and all the memories lost in the shadows of your heart will come back.”

“Another promise…” Behind his closed eyes, he could see a faint light.

“Look at the good luck charm. I changed its shape when I changed your memory—but when you thought of her just once, it went back to the way it was.”

The light glimmered and turned into the good luck charm. Beyond that glow stood Naminé. He murmured her name—but Naminé was already fading into mist, and someone else was standing there.

Who is that? I can’t remember…

All of his friends… And Riku.

There, standing in the middle… It was the red-haired girl.

Someone special to him.

“Kairi!”

The moment he said that name, she smiled.

And all the rest of his friends… Tidus, Selphie, Wakka, Leon, Yuffie, Aerith, Cid… And Riku. They all smiled.

“My friends…”

“See? Your memories are coming back.”

He turned around. Naminé was there, barely, shrouded in mist.

“Naminé?!”

“Don’t worry. You might forget about me…but we made a promise. So I can come back.” She held up her little finger that she’d joined with his.

“A promise is a promise.”

“That’s right. One day, the promise we made will become the light that brings us together. Till then, I’ll be in your heart…”

“I know. Forgotten, but not lost.”

He wouldn’t lose his memories of Naminé.

No matter what, those feelings…those pieces of memory would stay with him.

Promises would turn into light. The pieces would call to one another and link together into a chain.

That’s how I know…I won’t forget.

The light softly surrounded him.

And Naminé watched Sora fall asleep.

—The End – Sora’s Story—

Memories fading.
Memories reborn.

And a dream—
A dream of you in a world without you.

RIKU'S STORY
REVERSE/REBIRTH

RIKU'S STORY

REVERSE/REBIRTH

I was dreaming.
Kairi giggled. Sora was mad for some reason.
And me…I was falling over laughing between the two of them.
We could hear the sound of the waves.
It was that place we knew so well—Destiny Island.
The place I left behind. Our island, our home.
Sora called my name. "Riku!"
Kairi did, too. "Riku!"
Someone called to me—"Riku!"
And I slowly opened my eyes.

PROLOGUE

STARTING IN DARKNESS

IT WAS AN IN-BETWEEN PLACE, NOT DARK, BUT NOT filled with light, either. Riku got up and quietly shook his head. Fog seemed to cover his mind.

"Where…am I…?"

He felt a faint light surrounding him. Or—it wasn't quite light, but something more hazy. This was a strange place.

"Stay asleep."

The low voice suddenly echoed over him.

Riku jumped to his feet. "Who's there?!"

"You should remain asleep. Here in the place between light and darkness."

"Between light and darkness…?" Riku repeated in a mumble, and then his eyes closed again.

He'd never heard of anything like this place. Light or darkness—that was what he knew. But neither?

"Wait—where's the king?!" Riku shouted.

Since he closed the Door of Darkness with the king, he'd been wandering through this dim place. But together—he was sure they'd been together.

Then what…? Did I do something?

"The king is far away," said the voice. "You should leave the fight against the darkness to him and sleep. Right now, the light of awakening will be too bright for you. It will only hurt you. Turn from the light and close your eyes."

"You're talking like *I'm* some kind of creature of the darkness."

But it was true that he'd turned away from the light.

No—not from the light exactly. From Sora.

Because Sora shone too brightly…

And then, he became the hero of light, and I gave myself over to the darkness.

But I'm not just a creature of the dark.

"Do you want to know the truth?" the voice asked him.

Truth? …What could that even mean? Was there really any such thing as

truth?

"Stay here, blanketed by the darkness, and sleep will protect you…forever."

Riku stared out at the void and said nothing. *That's not my style…!*

The moment he thought that, the air trembled, and the voice seemed to be laughing.

"So, you do want to know the truth. In that case…"

Out of the empty air, a single card fluttered to Riku's feet.

"What's this…?"

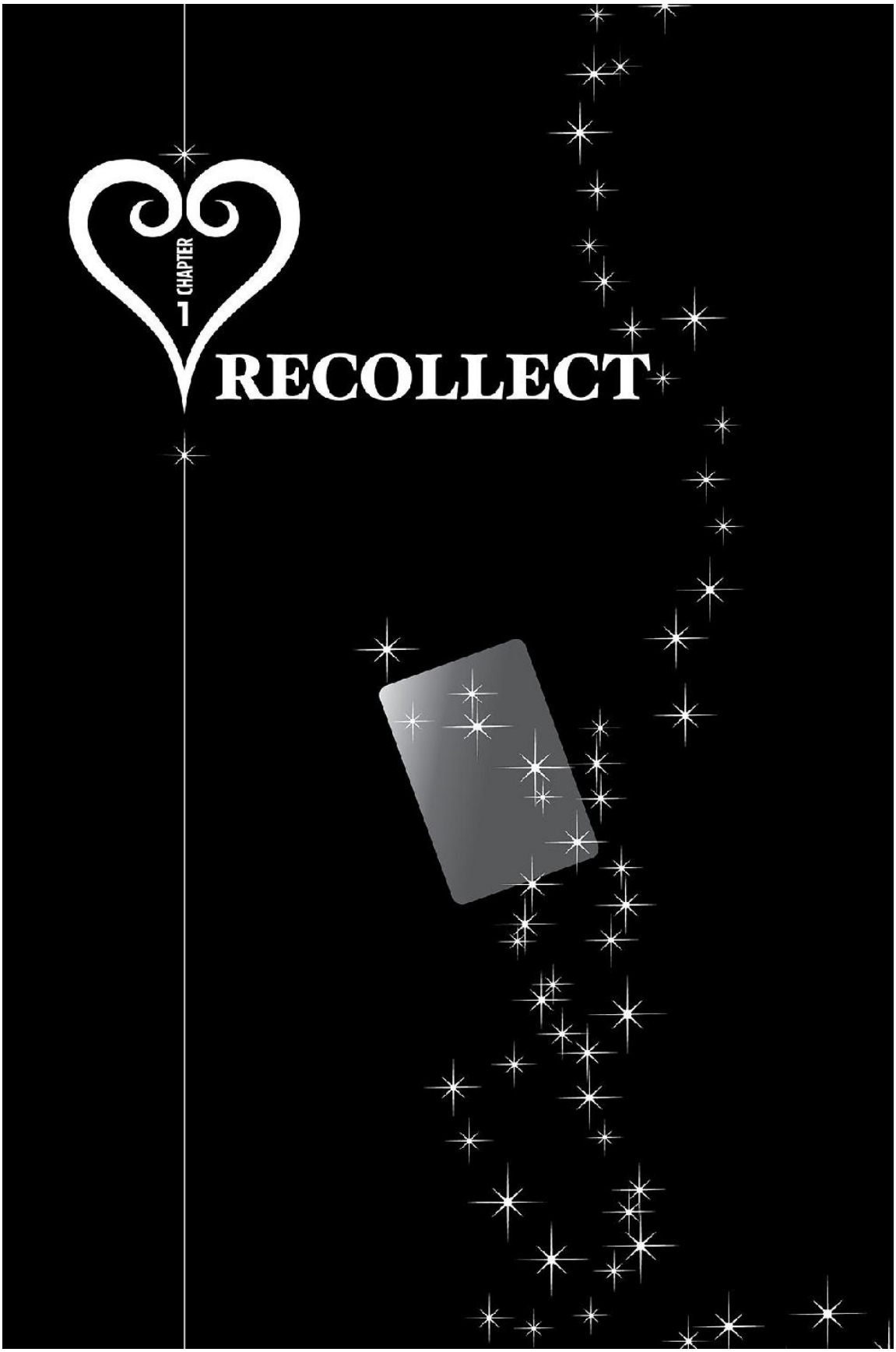
"It is a door to the truth. Take it, and your sleep will end as you take the first step toward the truth. But know this: The truth will bring you pain. Will you still go?"

Riku picked up the card, his mouth curving in a wry smile. "This seems like a boring place to take a nap, anyway."

"There will be no return to the safety of sleep."

"That's fine with me."

"…Well said, Riku," the voice replied, sounding amused again. The world began to tilt and spin, and everything changed.


CHAPTER 1
RECOLLECT

CHAPTER 1

RECOLLECT

HE STOOD IN A MARBLE HALL, STARK AND COLD. Carved of stone, lifeless flowers embellished the walls—like gravestones, Riku thought.

All he held was a single card.

"A door to the truth, huh…?" In the empty hall, Riku stared at the card, which showed a picture of a castle.

His footfalls on the marble floor made high chilly echoes—the only sound he could hear. He stopped at the bottom of a staircase. At the top, he could see a door.

What was waiting for him beyond it?

He climbed the stairs.

"The truth will bring you pain."

Even if it is painful, Riku thought, *it'll only be the punishment for what I did.*

The card began to glow, and the door slowly opened to let him in.

Beyond the door was a place Riku knew. Thorny rose decorations here and there. The memories they brought up in him were not pleasant.

This was Hollow Bastion—the enormous castle where the witch Maleficent lived. And he had been here, too, during the time when he'd given himself over to the darkness.

How had he ended up back here? Had something brought him here while he slept?

The last time he'd lost consciousness, it had been here. The last memory he had before that was standing up to Ansem, trying to protect Kairi.

And then he'd been walking alone through the darkness. Along the way, he met up with King Mickey…but now he was alone again.

If there was any truth to be found, maybe he would find it here in this castle.

"This is the world of your memories," the voice rang out.

Riku looked up. It was the same low voice as before—whoever had given

him that card. “My memories?”

“The things you remember from your time at Maleficent’s castle came into contact with the card, and that card created this world. You’ve seen everything here before, haven’t you?”

It was true. This place was just like he remembered—just like it was then.

This was where I let Maleficent trick me into bringing her Kairi. Where I stayed by Kairi’s side while she slept. Kairi never moved or spoke, just like a doll. But I stayed with her…and I felt happy, just a little bit. Because I had her all to myself.

But…

Riku shouted up at the empty air. “So what am I supposed to do now? Am I going to learn something here? Meet someone?”

“You would meet the people in your memories…ordinarily.”

“What does *that* mean?”

The voice didn’t answer.

“Hey! I’m asking you a question!” But the moment he said that, darkness welled up around him. “…What’s going on?!”

What appeared were the creatures he once had been able to control—the Heartless. A lot of them. And they were all heading straight for him.

Reflexively, he fell into a fighting stance, and with a black glow, something took form in his hands. It was a dark sword shaped like a demon’s wing. Soul Eater.

“So this is my sword?” He swung it and a Heartless vanished where it stood.

He thought he’d turned away from the darkness…but this demon-wing sword suited him, as if it had been his all along.

That was an unpleasant thought. Still, he ran into the fray of Heartless and lashed out with Soul Eater. It took them out in swaths and they disappeared.

Riku ran up the stairs and more Heartless came. He attacked again. “…What’s going on here, anyway?”

This was the first time he’d actually fought against the Heartless. They used to fight on his side, almost as if they were his friends.

But now they were his enemies—and if that was true, then Maleficent was his enemy, too, and Hook, and all the rest. Those who used the power of the darkness were all his enemies.

Then, on his side…he had Sora and Kairi…and the king. And all of Sora’s friends.

Although he wasn’t sure they would think of him as their ally…

“Out of the way!” he yelled, swinging Soul Eater and running up the stairs to the room he knew was there.

If he remembered things properly…

“It must be nice being back in your old room,” said the voice before Riku could even look around. “Full of memories for you, isn’t it?”

An unpleasant voice and unpleasant memories. Riku glowered. “Sorry, but these memories I could do without,” he retorted. “Maleficent gave me this room.”

Right…this little room that Maleficent had made up just for me. I stayed here in this castle, except when I went to Captain Hook’s ship to get Kairi. And when I was here I spent most of that time in this room.

Swinging a sword…reading books…and what else? Thinking about things that upset him. He’d been angry at something.

He’d believed it was his fault that Kairi was in that state…but he told himself that it wasn’t a mistake to have gone to other worlds and gently touched her face as she slept.

“And you lived here, tempted by the power of the darkness she offered. You cast away your home, your friends, everything… But at least she gave you a nice little room.”

“Be quiet!” Riku snapped and ran out of the room.

He dashed through the halls, blasting aside Heartless as he went, and up more stairs until at last he reached a tiny door and yanked it open.

Outside was the sky that surrounded Hollow Bastion, dim as if before the dawn. No land or water to be seen—only the endless sky.

Riku had been free to wander the castle, and sometimes, he’d come up here to the highest tower. It was his secret place, where no one else came to bother him, not even Maleficent.

“Everything *is* just how I remember it…,” he murmured and sat down.

I cast away everything. It’s true—I did when I left our island.

Here in this tower, he’d told himself that over and over.

And then it came—the night of the storm. I wanted to see other worlds so badly that I gave in to the darkness.

It didn’t matter how. As long as I got to see those other worlds—as long as I could escape that place.

So I left behind our island…and Sora and Kairi.

“…I’ve been so stupid.”

He couldn’t really get rid of them, though.

No—I did. I abandoned Sora and Kairi, but they didn’t abandon me.

They didn’t give up.

That’s why I wanted to help Kairi.

Sora’s innocent grin got so annoying—I would have done anything to save her before he did.

The wind riffled Riku’s bangs.

I wonder if I’ll really meet anyone from my memories in this castle…

The one I want to see…is Sora.

Even more than Kairi, more than anyone else. I want to see Sora.

I want to tell him I’m sorry.

Riku stood up and reached for the door. *I can’t run away. When I see Sora, I want to be able to look him in the eye…*

He went back down into the castle.

Wherever he went, he met nothing but Heartless. No matter where he wandered, he didn’t find Sora. Or anyone else. There seemed to be no one in the castle at all.

No one but that strange man’s voice.

“Hey! I know you’re watching!” Riku called out. “So explain this! Where are the people in my memories?!”

“Do you truly want to see them?”

At the sudden question, Riku stopped in his tracks. “Of course I do.”

Why wouldn’t he? *I want to see them. Sora…and Kairi.*

“But you cast them aside,” said the voice.

I did. I left them. But…

“You longed to go to other worlds, and you passed through the Door of Darkness. Behind you, you left your family, your friends, your home—everything. All in pursuit of the darkness.”

“I cast aside the darkness, too!”

That’s right, Riku told himself. *I left the darkness behind. I won’t let it tempt me anymore. And that’s why…*

“And what do you have to show for it? First your home, then the darkness. Your heart only knows how to cast things away. It’s empty…just like that room. Like your memories. That’s why you won’t meet anyone. Your heart is hollow. Nothing remains but the lingering darkness.”

The words echoed through Riku’s head like a spell.

“You’re wrong!” he cried. “I rejected the darkness!”

That time. I did—even the king said so. I wasn’t about to become a puppet for Ansem.

“Did you really now…? Keep going, then. The one you long to meet is waiting.”

Riku looked up, and there was a great door in front of him. Through there would be the grand hall, where Maleficent had always been…

He ran toward it.

This was the castle chapel, magnificent with its tall stained glass windows.

And she was standing there. “I knew you would return, Riku.”

“Maleficent…” He faced her with Soul Eater ready.

“Oh, come now, what kind of greeting is that? After I took you in like a son…?” She stepped toward him with open arms.

“Don’t come any closer,” Riku said quietly. “Of all the people I could run into, it had to be you.”

“But of course. Don’t I love you more than anyone else in all these worlds? Here, come closer…” Maleficent reached out for him.

“I don’t think so!” He shoved her hand aside and jumped back.

She laughed softly, as if he only amused her.

“What’s so funny?!”

“Your heart is steeped in darkness,” she said. “And you can only see those who exist in that same darkness—like myself. It’s only natural.”

“No…”

My heart is steeped in darkness, so I can’t see anyone else…or I can only see people like Maleficent? he thought. *That’s what she’s telling me?*

“Be grateful you have someone to keep you company,” Maleficent went on. “Your heart is empty. If not for the darkness lingering there, you would be completely alone.”

“I’m not all that interested in your company.”

But is that really true? Riku wondered to himself. *When I was all alone, who else was there for me?*

When I saw those two, the king’s men, Donald and Goofy, messing around and laughing with Sora in Traverse Town—who else came to speak kindly to me?

“Is that so? You once turned to me to sate your hunger for the darkness. In the depths of your heart, you must have wished to see me. Who else can grant you the darkness you long for?”

Maleficent's words wound around him sweetly, like a lullaby. Riku bit his lip.

"There was a time I did want you around. I surrendered my heart to the darkness. But now I know—you and your darkness have nothing to offer." He took a deep breath.

She looked straight at him, into him.

"I'm finished with all that," he told her. "If I'm stuck seeing people like you, people of the dark…I'll take you out, one by one."

He leaped at Maleficent with Soul Eater out to strike. She blocked the blow with her staff.

"Then, you mustn't forget to destroy yourself last," she replied. "For like me, you are one of the dark."

"That's fine with me! I turned to darkness because my heart was weak. And I hate that weakness!" He backed up, putting some distance between them, and then dashed in to attack again. "It's like I'm my own enemy. Seeing people like you who embrace the darkness—I know I'm like that. It just makes me more disgusted with myself!"

The tip of Soul Eater grazed Maleficent's chin.

"So you hate the darkness enough that you can only think to fight it?"

"I've heard enough out of you, Maleficent," Riku snapped, breathing hard.

They could keep talking like this forever. It wouldn't matter. He wouldn't go back to the darkness.

"How your heart must be suffering," she crooned. "I can almost feel it myself…"

"Just stop talking!" He swung at her, and she slid easily aside.

"Then, let me end your pain, Riku…with the wondrous power of darkness!" A dark aura surrounded her and grew, and Maleficent transformed into a dragon, spouting flames at him.

"—Tch!" Riku jumped back. He wasn't sure how to fight something this big.

And then—

"Riku!"

He heard a voice from somewhere. But it wasn't the same voice that had been following him…

"King Mickey?!"

"There's no time to explain! Now! Hurry!"

Just as the king's voice said that, the ceiling began to crumble.

"Your Majesty! Where are you?!"

"Don't worry about that! Just fight!"

Stones from the ceiling piled up in front of Riku, giving him something to climb. “Okay—I will!”

He ran atop the pile and swung Soul Eater.

With every huge footstep, the dragon made the pile of stones tumble apart beneath Riku’s feet, but it was still much better than having nothing to climb at all.

“I won’t let in the darkness! Ever again!” He slashed up at the dragon’s throat. It let out a terrible roar and fell—then changed back into the witch.

“Maleficent…” Riku moved closer to her, keeping his sword trained on her head.

“Oh, Riku… You can’t escape the dark.”

“I don’t want to hear it! Just shut up!”

He brought Soul Eater down on her—and Maleficent’s body turned to glowing light and disappeared.

He stared hard at the light as it faded.

What if…Maleficent really did care about me…?

She was the only one who ever talked to me here. I really believed she understood me. But she was full of the power of darkness, and it brought her to ruin.

She was using me. I let the darkness in her take me in. But…

“King Mickey…?”

He was sure the voice he’d heard was the king. Maybe the king knew the answer. The king would know…

Through the broken walls, Riku found a door. He had to just keep going. And then…maybe he would find the truth.

He ran toward the door.

The air inside the dim chamber was strangely humid. And it wasn’t just damp, stagnant air—something else nasty seemed to fill the place. A man stood quietly in the middle of the room. His uneven blue hair nearly covered his eyes.

The man frowned, as if waiting impatiently for something.

Then a tall, fit man with short-trimmed brown hair appeared and stepped toward him.

“Don’t I even warrant a hello, Lexaeus?” said the blue-haired man.

“What is going on here, Zexion?” the other demanded. “I want an explanation!”

A third man appeared in the center of the room. His long, dull blond hair

framed a horribly sallow face.

“Nice to see you too, Vexen,” said Zexion, the blue-haired one, without even looking at the newcomer. “Such a shame. Whatever happened to our bond as members of the organization?”

“How dare you—?!”

“Let it go, Vexen.” Lexaeus held up a forbidding hand at him.

A brief silence fell in the small gloomy chamber, and Zexion sighed heavily.

Lexaeus interrupted the quiet. “Now tell us, Zexion. What did you detect?”

“…Visitors,” said Zexion. “I picked up two scents in the deepest levels of the castle’s basement. One was Malefi—”

“Don’t be absurd,” Vexen cut him off. “The witch is gone. She cannot return from the realm of darkness of her own volition.”

“If you would let me finish… The scent belonged not to the real Maleficent, but to a very convincing double. Unfortunately, I cannot say much beyond that, as the double is no more—courtesy of our other visitor.” Zexion shrugged.

Aboveground, some enormous scheme was under way. Although…

“And who is that?” asked Lexaeus.

“I do not know for sure,” Zexion replied quietly. “But…the scent was very similar to that of our Superior. Nearly close enough to mistake it for him.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Vexen snarled. There was simply no way that could be.

To think anything could resemble their Superior so closely…

“Those are the facts. So…what shall we do?” said Zexion.

But that question already had an answer. They could hardly just stand by and watch the aboveground members carry out their plans.

“…For now, we wait. See what develops.” Lexaeus named the only conclusion. The three nodded.

Through the door was another hall of cold marble, the same as before he’d entered Hollow Bastion. And across it was the next door. Riku started toward it. There didn’t seem to be any Heartless in here.

The voice he’d heard, though—it had definitely been the king. Except Riku hadn’t seen him anywhere. Maybe he’d only imagined it.

“Why do you shun the darkness?” That low voice rang out again.

“Come on, weren’t you listening?” said Riku. “I know you heard every word I said to Maleficent.”

I’m not going to let anyone use me ever again. And I won’t use the power of darkness.

“Darkness is your weapon,” the voice went on. “It is time you learned—you must accept it.”

Riku looked silently up at the ceiling.

“Stop resisting. Accept the darkness. You have no choice but to serve me again!”

He felt the air waver. And then, he saw that man—the one who had taken control of Riku’s body, tried to make him into a mere possession. Ansem.

“I thought it was you,” Riku muttered.

“Oh? You don’t seem surprised.”

Showing nothing, Riku looked directly into Ansem’s face.

“All you’ve been talking about is the darkness. So I can assume you’re only here to pull me back in…to play puppet master.”

“Clever boy. I knew you’d be the best one to serve me.” Ansem moved closer, seeming to glide rather than walk. “And now, you’ll surrender to me again—”

“You’re insane! Not a chance!” Riku raised Soul Eater and slashed out.

“Fool.” Ansem blocked the sword with nothing more than his own arm and threw Riku back.

“Ngh—?!”

“Did you really think you could do me any harm? A weakling like you couldn’t even defeat Sora—and you had the darkness on your side.”

“Excuse me…for being so weak…” Riku staggered to one knee.

“Yes, you are weak. You need the darkness. Surrender. Bow to darkness. Bow to me.” Ansem walked to where Riku fell and took him by the arm.

“…That’s not gonna happen.” Riku turned away.

Ansem loomed closer, trying to look him in the eye. “Only the darkness can offer to you the strength that you need.”

I really can’t do anything unless I use the darkness…?

I lost to Sora. And Ansem, too. And there’s no one to help me. When there was, it was only the Heartless or Maleficent…only creatures of the dark. Riku’s eyes stung with angry tears. *So I can’t do anything at all without the darkness…*

“You’re wrong!”

The voice spoke again from somewhere.

“…Your Majesty?!”

A sphere of bright light drifted close to them.

“That’s right! Remember, Riku, you’re not alone.” As he heard the king’s voice, the light shone and poured into him. “Just believe. The light’ll never give

up on you. You'll always find it, even in the deepest darkness!"

"…I got it." Riku stood up.

I'm not alone. I still have friends. I have the king on my side.

"I won't lose to the darkness. Not today!" Riku aimed Soul Eater at Ansem.

"You think that feeble little light can save you from the darkness that I command?" Ansem rushed at him.

Riku raised the sword and blocked Ansem's blow. "Give me all you've got. I'll give it right back!"

He pushed, straining to throw Ansem back, but Ansem held him there, heavy as a boulder, and finally relented, laughing.

"What's so funny?!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" Ansem's laughter grew louder, and he spread both arms wide. "It seems you are intent on resisting the darkness. All right—then see it for yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Riku edged nearer, ready to attack again, but Ansem tossed four cards at him.

"These are cards crafted from your memories. Advance through the worlds they create, and soon, you will understand… No matter how much you chase after the light, you will never distance yourself from the darkness. There is no escaping it!"

"Don't worry, I'm not running. I'll enter those worlds, and in the end, if I haven't given in to the darkness, then I win!"

Ansem didn't seem to hear him at all, but only snapped his fingers. "I have one more gift for you."

A dark glow surrounded Riku. "What're you doing?!"

He tried to shake himself free of it, but the darkness clung to him. Something abhorrent seemed to stir to life inside his heart.

What…is this?!

"I simply tempered the darkness that yet remains in your heart," said Ansem.

"You really still think I'll rely on darkness?"

"Use it, or not—the choice is yours." Ansem leaped lightly back away from him. "I'll be waiting, Riku… For you to sense it and yield to the darkness within you!"

"Hey!" Riku tried to follow him, but Ansem simply vanished.

"The darkness within me…" Riku stared helplessly at his hands.

Darkness remaining in my heart… How long do I have to be stuck with it?

"Something…smells funny…" Even though Ansem was gone, Riku thought,

it felt like the air had changed. “Is that…the smell of darkness?”

It was like that certain scent he’d always picked up from Maleficent, from Hook, from the Heartless—from all those who lived in the darkness.

And if he could smell it now…it must mean he was just one of their pawns. He still belonged to the darkness.

“Don’t worry, Riku.”

He looked up—and this time King Mickey was standing there.

“Your Majesty?! Wait…what happened? I can see right through you…”

Riku could see the king, but not quite—as if he might disappear any moment.

“Funny, huh?” said the king. “I can only send a bit of my power to this place. That’s why I’ve got a request for ya.”

“A request…?”

The king, even though he was hardly there, like a ghost, was looking right at him. “Listen, Riku. Just because the darkness has a hold of ya, don’t let go of who you are. You’ve got to fight the darkness inside you! It won’t be easy, I know. But please, don’t forget. Even in the deepest darkness, there’s always a little bit of light.”

“Light within the darkness…,” Riku murmured.

“You and me, we’ve seen it. The welcoming light far beyond the Door of Darkness—the light of Kingdom Hearts. It’ll show you the way. So don’t give up. Believe in the light. That’s a request from my heart.”

“Don’t give up. Believe.”

But the darkness is in me. All over me. I stink of it…

“Okay, Riku?”

“Okay… I’ll do my best,” said Riku, trying to trust the king.

If the light of Kingdom Hearts can even reach me… If it can shine on me, too, and not just Sora…then maybe I can believe.

“I’ll keep tryin’ to find a way to reach you. I’ll get there, I promise.” The king reached out with his hand.

Riku tried to take it but only passed through. “I can’t touch you… Are you an illusion…?”

“Don’t worry. We shook hands in our hearts. You and me, we’re connected, remember?”

“…Guess we are.”

But that connection felt so distant and fragile…he was a little bit lonely.

“Well, I gotta be going.” The king smiled up at him and disappeared.

“So I’m alone again…” Riku breathed a tiny sigh and went to the next door.

CHAPTER 2

RECALL

CHAPTER 2

RECALL

RIKU OPENED THE DOOR, AND ON THE OTHER SIDE WAS a strangely colorful world.

"So I'm…in Monstro." He stepped forward over the unsteady floor.

I met Sora in here before. Sora was just like always—except he was stronger than he used to be. It made me resent him somehow.

"What're you doing?"

The voice addressed him out of nowhere. Startled, Riku readied himself to fight. But a face poked out of the shadows.

"…Pinocchio!"

"Gee, how do you know my name?" Pinocchio strolled up to him with a cheerful smile.

The wooden puppet with a heart. I wanted to know how it was that he had one, so I kidnapped him.

"Well…," Riku evaded. "That doesn't matter."

"Are you all alone?"

"Yeah."

Pinocchio stood in front of Riku, peering up into his face. "So am I!"

But as he said that, his nose grew. "Oops."

That's right—Pinocchio's nose gets longer whenever he tells a lie. So that means he's not alone in here, Riku thought. *Unlike me.*

"You're not alone, are you, Pinocchio?"

"Um… No. My father's here, too. Do you have a father?"

"I don't have anyone."

No one at all.

"Oh. So you're all alone… Whoa!" Pinocchio's nose grew longer again. "Hey, no fair! Don't trick me into telling lies!"

Laughing, Pinocchio held his nose, trying to push it back down.

"You're not alone." It felt like Riku could hear King Mickey's voice again.

But no one ever stays with me. I'm always alone. I believe in him…but I'm still so alone.

"So you're not alone, either!" Finally, Pinocchio's nose shrank back down to its normal size. He rubbed it, giggled—and then disappeared.

"…I am too alone," Riku mumbled and kept walking.

Why am I alone? he wondered. *Is it because I lost my heart to the darkness? But I fought it back once. That isn't good enough? That's not enough for me to see Kairi and Sora?*

What do I have to do to see them again? What do I have to do so the three of us can be laughing together again?

He didn't know.

All he knew was that he just had to keep moving forward. He had to find out what the truth was. And then, he'd understand what he had to do.

"…So what if I'm alone." He kicked at a weird, flabby lump on the wall.

The lump split open and Heartless poured out.

"Oh, so *you* guys are still with me, huh?" Riku stood ready with Soul Eater. They attacked him from every which way, and he jumped up high and brought the sword down on a Heartless.

A heart floated up from it as it turned to light and disappeared. The Heartless he'd once commanded.

If it wasn't for the Heartless—and all these people trying to use them—maybe we could have made it to the outside world on that tiny little raft.

He recalled the night of the storm…

When the storm came, I went out to the little islet, to make sure the raft didn't float away.

I was running through the driving rain, trying to get to the inlet, and then I noticed that a great big door had appeared in front of our secret spot. What's a door doing there…? *I thought, and just then, someone whispered to me—*

"You want to see other worlds, don't you?"

I turned and a man in a black cloak was standing there.

"The door will soon open. You have nothing to fear. There is no need to fear the darkness. Now, go… Riku."

I never hesitated. Nothing could hold back my longing to see the outside world.

"Riku!"

Kairi must have come to the islet with the raft in mind, too. She came running up to me.

"…cess.…art."

"…What?"

The man in the cloak said something, but I couldn't hear it over the pounding waves. He was looking at Kairi, though, and now I know what it was he said.

A Princess of Heart.

"Riku! The raft'll get washed away!"

"Never mind the raft, Kairi! There's another way to go to the outside world!"

"Huh?" She stared at me, looking confused. "What about Sora?"

Right. Because Kairi would only think of Sora.

But I was the same way. When Sora and I were together, we could go anywhere. I really believed that. And then, with Kairi, who had to know something about the outside world…together, there was nowhere we couldn't go.

"Sora and Kairi can come, too, can't they?" I said to the man in the black cloak. He nodded silently—then, he seemed to vanish into the door.

"Hey, Riku… What was that about…?"

It was raining so hard by then that I could hardly make out Kairi's expression.

"Kairi, you wait here by the door. I'll go get Sora!"

"Riku! Wait!"

I ignored her protest and started to run.

To get Sora. That's where I was going.

Sora! Sora! Hey, Sora! We can leave this world right now!

He came worrying about the raft, too. I found him soon.

"Where's Kairi? I thought she was with you!"

The first thing he said to me was about her.

"The door has opened," I told him.

"Riku?" He stopped in his tracks. He was looking at me strangely, too.

"The door is open, Sora. Now we can go to the outside world!"

Sora was only ever thinking about Kairi. And Kairi was only ever thinking about Sora. But now that would change.

"Kairi's coming with us!" I shouted. "Once we step through, we might not be able to come back. But this might be our only chance. We can't let fear stop us! I'm not afraid of the darkness!"

I reached out my hand for him.

Come on, Sora—let's go!

“…Riku?” He looked just a little bit nervous as he tried to take my hand.

I had no idea what was happening around me right then. I never even glanced at it. All I cared about was that Sora was right there, and I was reaching for him.

Just a little bit more and he would make it. “…Sora…”

The moment I called his name—that was when I noticed the darkness swirling around me. Darkness was covering my body…but there was no need to be afraid of it!

And then…covered in darkness…everything went dark…and the next thing I knew, I was standing in Hollow Bastion.

And ever since that moment, I’ve been alone, Riku thought. *Why didn’t I notice that the darkness was taking hold of me? I couldn’t even see anything else.*

“Take that!” Riku swung Soul Eater and knocked back the Heartless in his way.

What went wrong? How did I end up so alone?

Riku took out the Heartless one after another, blocking out his own thoughts.

On the first floor of Castle Oblivion…

Sora stood in the white hall.

“We gotta if we’re gonna find the king,” Donald Duck murmured.

“The king’s here?” said Goofy. Sora turned back to them.

“Well, I don’t know for sure,” Donald said stubbornly. “Something just told me he’d be here, okay?”

“Aw, shucks…” Goofy’s shoulders drooped. “But now that ya mention it, I was kinda thinkin’ the same thing!”

“You too, Goofy?” said Sora. “So was I!”

The strange feeling he’d had before they walked into the castle…it was a hunch that he might meet someone here.

“One look at this castle and I just knew. Our very best friends…they’re here.” Sora stared up at the door atop the stairs.

Maybe—no, definitely. They’d find their friends. He was sure of it. Riku was somewhere in this castle…

Vexen stayed in the gloomy chamber, carrying out some kind of work. A

puppet came tumbling in front of him. It had no face and no clothes. Vexen smiled a twisted smile at it.

“I have identified the scent,” said a voice from behind him. Vexen turned to see Zexion standing there. “It is Riku.”

“The scent…? Oh, the other presence that appeared beside Maleficent.” Vexen considered this. “But Riku—he was stuck with the king behind the Door of Darkness. How could he have escaped?”

Impossible. Riku must have vanished in there.

“His being was once merged with the darkness,” Zexion replied, detached and clinical. “And he may be closer to the darkness now.”

“Fascinating… So that’s why you mistook him for the Superior. The dark power given to Riku must have facilitated his escape from its realm. Quite a specimen—connected to both the Keyblade and the darkness. We’ll need more data.” Vexen turned back to the puppet.

“What I would like to know is why he appeared here in Castle Oblivion,” said Zexion.

Vexen laughed over his shoulder. “Oh, that’s really quite simple. His existence resonates with that of another hero.”

“Sora, you mean?”

“The very same. He arrived earlier. By now, that scoundrel Marluxia must have set his plan in motion—using Naminé’s powers to meddle with Sora’s heart.” Vexen sounded glad about it, for some reason.

Zexion listened quietly.

“It seems he desperately wants the Keyblade master for himself. Well, he can have his silly plots. While he plays around with Sora, we’ll have Riku all to ourselves. The entity that holds real value is the one so much like our Superior—Riku, the hero of darkness!”

With that, Vexen resumed his work, making an adjustment to the puppet in front of him. Zexion kept on watching.

No matter how far he kept going, he only ran into more Heartless.

“Why…” Riku kept swinging Soul Eater as if he could cut through the misgivings in his own heart.

Maybe I’m only finding Heartless because nothing but darkness remains in my heart.

I met Pinocchio, though. So there must be others around somewhere, too.

But I’m supposed to find you *here—Sora.*

Heartless after Heartless turned to light and disappeared. *Where do they go when they disappear?* he wondered. *Do they go back to the realm of darkness? If I disappear, will the same thing happen to me?*

Riku eradicated the last of them and stood catching his breath.

Just then, an enormous round mass fell down from the ceiling.

"What is *that*?!" Riku jumped back and held Soul Eater ready again.

It was a huge Heartless—the Parasite Cage. Long arms flailed out from its squat round body, and its teeth gnashing together looked like prison bars over the gaping mouth.

"Perfect. I'm in the mood to hit something!" Riku ran straight at it. But as he did, black mist rose up around him. "Huh…?"

He stopped and saw that his hands were swathed in darkness—and his whole body.

"What's happening to me?" he muttered, and the Parasite Cage swiped at him with its arm. *"Ngh—!"*

But it didn't knock him over. It was like he simply absorbed the attack—he was still standing. And now there was a black cloak covering him.

"What…?"

The Parasite Cage lashed at him again, trying to push him over, and Riku brought Soul Eater down on its arm. He could feel the terrible power in that strike. And this cloak—it was the same as when Ansem had taken hold of him. So this darkness was…

"I simply tempered the darkness that yet remains in your heart." That was what Ansem had told him.

"The darkness in my heart is making me stronger?" Staring at his hand, Riku bit his lip. The Parasite Cage attacked again. But it didn't even scratch him. He leaped up and brought Soul Eater down on its head.

The Parasite Cage let out a terrible shriek and dissolved into sparks of light. Darkness swirled around Riku, the same as before he found himself wearing the ink-black cloak, and then his outfit returned to normal.

"The power of…darkness…"

That strength, that speed—everything was much more than he knew he usually had in him. A shiver ran up his spine. *Am I going to be swallowed up by the darkness…?*

He felt like the stench of darkness that clung to him had gotten stronger, too.

A door appeared where the Parasite Cage had vanished. His fists clenched hard, Riku walked through it.

He emerged into another hall of marble.

But unlike before, a man was standing there waiting for him. “You must be Riku.”

“Are you with Ansem?” Riku didn’t take a fighting stance with Soul Eater, but only stared hard at the man.

He was sickly pale, with long hair, and wore some kind of black cloak, which looked familiar to Riku. And one thing was certain—the man stank of darkness, too.

“Well… You are half correct. But let us say he is not the Ansem with whom you are familiar. He is Ansem and he is not Ansem. Perhaps the best way to say it is…*Nobody*.”

The man stepped slowly toward him.

“Nobody? *Hmph*,” Riku snorted. “I’m not in the mood for riddles. Try again.”

“He belongs to neither the light nor the dark, but walks the twilight between. How is that?”

Belonging to neither—he can’t belong. Riku thought that sounded like… himself.

“Heh-heh… Catching on now? Oh yes—you also stand between the light and the darkness. As well as myself. It seems we have some things in common.”

“Maybe.” Riku raised Soul Eater, then. “So what? Are you going to tell me to join you? Like you said, there really is darkness still inside me. But it’s my enemy! And so are you for reeking of that awful smell!”

“Oh, so it’s a fight you want? Very well! I’ll oblige!” A huge blue shield appeared in the man’s hand.

“Fine with me.” Riku rushed at him—but the man vanished right in front of his face. “What?!”

“Over here.”

The spikes on the edge of the shield raked Riku’s back. He winced.

“Not that I needed to tell you. Ha! Now freeze!”

Huge crystals of ice flew at Riku, one after another. He couldn’t evade all of them.

“So this is all you’ve got without the power of darkness?” the man taunted.

“*No!*” Riku shouted, hunched over.

“Go ahead, use the darkness—you have what it takes, after all.”

“I *hate* the darkness! And I won’t use it!”

“Ha-ha… Well, that works, too.” The man laughed louder and lunged at

Riku.

With a short cry of rage, Riku lifted Soul Eater and barely managed to ward off the blow.

“Yes, feel your anger—show me the darkness inside you!”

“I—won’t…!” he ground out, and dark mist began to close around him. “No…”

Chuckling, the man smoothly backed away.

“…Why you…”

So the darkness would just leak out of his heart, he thought, as if it took a cue from the anger he showed on his face…

In despair, Riku saw himself change again.

“There, now we’re equal—well, that is, we will be if you can learn to use the dark power the way it’s meant to be used. Shall we?”

The man closed in and struck with his shield—but this time Riku swung Soul Eater to meet it and the shield went flying from his hand.

“Splendid!” The shield vanished before it hit the floor. “The darkness coursing through you is growing in its formidable power—well worth the trouble of aggravating you.”

Riku glared back at the man, motionless. “So it was a trick all along.”

“All the excitement has provided me with invaluable data. I should thank you, Riku!” And then, with a high cruel laugh, the man disappeared.

“Ugh…” The strength left him and Riku collapsed to his knees. “Why…?”

This black cloak, as if he was clothed in darkness—and Soul Eater charged with a dark glow.

Do I really have nothing but the darkness to give me strength…?

“I remember!” Sora blurted.

Donald turned to look at him. “Remember what?”

“There was another girl!” said Sora as if to convince himself.

“What? A girl? Where?” Goofy looked around for her.

“No, no, I mean on the islands, where I used to live.” Sora ran back to Donald and Goofy.

Goofy realized that Sora was talking about the place where he’d grown up with his friends. “Oh, you mean, uh… Des… Dusty… What was it again?”

“Destiny Islands! Besides Kairi and Riku, there was one other girl I was friends with. The four of us played together all the time.” And Sora began to tell them what he remembered…

CHAPTER 3

RIKU

CHAPTER 3

RIKU

ZEXION STOOD PERFECTLY STILL, ARMS FOLDED, IN the middle of the dim chamber.

Lexaeus appeared with a frown and scanned the room, then whirled to face Zexion and stepped closer. “Where’s Vexen?”

“He is finishing the replica, based on the data from Riku,” Zexion replied with the briefest of glances.

When the replica was complete, then they would have a chance of victory.

“And what’s happening to Sora?” Lexaeus demanded, not wasting a moment.

“Naminé’s powers are being used to shuffle his memories. Marluxia may well succeed in creating his puppet. We can’t trust Larxene, either.”

They knew that Marluxia and Larxene were up to something. And there was one other man who had control of the topside of Castle Oblivion…

“Or Axel,” Lexaeus said as if the name was distasteful. “Who knows what that one’s thinking?”

“We should stay out of it for now, and then speak of this to Vexen,” Zexion said in a tone meant to be calming and finally looked at Lexaeus.

Vexen had a higher-ranking number in the organization than either of them. The numbers did not directly correspond to strength or position, but ever since they first met, Vexen had been more or less a senior member to them.

That was from when they still had been *themselves*—when they were people called Even, Aeleus, and Ienzo. And it just didn’t make sense to let that fall apart. *So long as that man is the first in the organization, we will remain bound to that world*, Lexaeus thought.

“But Vexen despises Marluxia,” he said, averting his gaze from Zexion’s. “Think of the mess that would make.”

“So we must tell him. Isn’t it better for Vexen to clean up the mess rather than leave it to us?” Smiling faintly, Zexion looked down.

The world through the door was one Riku knew. He walked onto the swaying deck, placing each step firmly. At some point the darkness enveloping him had receded, and he had changed back to normal again.

"The power of darkness…," Riku mumbled and looked up to where the moon hung in the sky. He could hear the sound of the waves against the ship—Captain Hook's ship.

Here, in a little cabin, he had watched Kairi in her unmoving, sleeplike state.

Riku's hair gleamed silver in the moonlight, ruffled by the sea breezes. He climbed the stairs up to the quarterdeck. From there he could see out over the whole ship.

"Sora…" He murmured the name of his friend, who couldn't possibly be here.

There was no one to be seen at all. Riku clenched his fists and closed his eyes. Behind them, what came up was the image of Sora, calling to him as he stood there on the quarterdeck.

"I wanted to see you, too, Riku."

Why had he felt so disgusting when he heard those words?

"Kairi…" Riku turned to look at the mast. He could almost see her sleeping there, like a phantom.

But without her heart…it wasn't Kairi at all. That's why I wanted to get her heart back. Except…I wasn't the one who could.

Worse than that—I was here commanding the Heartless, trying to destroy Sora.

"Heh…"

Riku turned at the sudden intrusion of another voice. "Who's there?!"

A shadow rose unsteadily up from under his feet until it was standing in front of him.

"Ha-ha!" The shadow attacked.

Right—I controlled Sora's shadow here and made it fight him. His own pitch-black shadow…

The thing facing Riku now looked like his shadow or that of his former self from when he'd used the powers of darkness.

As he swung at the shadow with Soul Eater, a dark aura came over him.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!" The shadow laughed at Riku, who was cloaked again in darkness, and disappeared.

"Is it…really this hopeless?" Riku stared at his hands, wreathed in dark power. The moon still shone down on him.

In a dark room, he gazed into the crystal ball.

Inside the crystal ball, Riku was staring down at his hands.

"That one is afraid of the dark," Vexen whispered to him.

From his expression, it was impossible to say what the boy might be feeling.

"But you are different, aren't you? You have no fear of the dark."

The boy nodded in reply.

"Now go. Let the darkness into you. And defeat him!"

He nodded once more and left the room.

Riku went through the gently rocking ship. All he found, of course, were Heartless—the same as those Heartless he had once commanded. Up on the quarterdeck, when he saw Sora and Kairi, they were only illusions. He couldn't find the people he truly wanted to see.

Are there only dark things in the worlds of my memories? …Does that mean I belong to the darkness?

That can't be right…

Riku's Soul Eater sliced through the Heartless.

It felt like every time he fought, the stench of darkness clinging to him grew worse.

"Why…why is this happening?!" The harder he tried to run from it, the stronger it became.

Riku stood in the hold next to the captain's cabin.

"If you have to hurt someone else to get her heart back, that's just going to make her sad!" The words Sora had shouted to him in this place seemed to echo in his ears.

Is this my punishment? Do I deserve this because I tried to take back Kairi's heart by using the darkness?

"Just believe. The light'll never give up on you. You'll always find it, even in the deepest darkness!"

That's what the king told me. But I still can't believe in it.

No one stays with me… Not even the king.

How can I get this darkness out of me…?

Riku ran down the stairs and back out onto the deck. The night wind was cool on his face, so refreshing it was easy to take it in and not think of anything at all.

Carried over the ocean, it felt a little bit like the winds that blew on Destiny Island. That was comforting.

But…

“Well, now, boy, what’s happened to that bold spirit of yours?” The voice rang out over the deck. Riku looked up.

It was Hook—one of those who had worked with Maleficent, and the captain of the ship.

“So there you are.” Riku raised Soul Eater. “If I get rid of you, I’ll be able to leave, is that the deal?”

“You’d turn your sword against an old shipmate?” Hook sneered, with a much more cruel smile even than Riku remembered. “If you greet your friends with the end of a sword, you’ll only end up alone.”

“When were you ever my friend?!” Riku lunged forward. Hook caught the Soul Eater with his namesake, the hook he had in place of one hand.

“I was once, wasn’t I? You belonged to the darkness—like us!”

“I did not!”

“Lying to yourself—bad form!” Hook pushed Riku back and sent him sprawling.

“I’m not lying to anyone! I only went along with you because I was trying to help Kairi!”

“Do you think the reason matters? You were one of us. And now you’d betray your fellows?”

“Shut up!”

Hook was never my friend—and neither was Maleficent. Sora and Kairi are my friends!

“Good—you’ll give more strength to the darkness that way, Riku!”

“I’m not letting it get any stronger!” Riku got to his feet and lifted his sword again.

“Is that so? Take a look at yourself, my boy!”

Prompted, Riku looked. The darkness was spreading around him again—the *smell* of it!

“No matter where you go, you will never escape the dark.” Hook’s sword drove Riku into a corner.

“You’re wrong…!” Riku whirled, swinging Soul Eater hard, as if trying to shake off the aura of darkness that surrounded him.

“Accept the darkness in yourself, Riku!”

“Stop *talking*!”

Riku’s strike connected and Hook vanished on the spot.

“I don’t need the darkness…,” Riku said under his breath, lowering Soul Eater.

Why…is this happening…?

I don't need the darkness. These people aren't my friends.

More and more, I can't trust myself.

Is this the truth I'm searching for? That I can't win without the power of darkness? That I have to just give up and let it take me?

He saw a little door at the corner of the deck.

Now he felt like he didn't want to know the truth.

The truth about himself…

"Just believe."

He could hear the king's voice from somewhere.

"Believe in what?" Riku muttered at the king, who wasn't even there.

He didn't know what to believe.

"Even in the deepest darkness, there's always a little bit of light."

"I don't understand…" Riku shook his head.

The harder he tried to fight the darkness inside him, the stronger it seemed to grow… He was afraid.

Afraid of himself. Of the darkness within himself.

And he couldn't trust himself.

"Just believe, Riku."

The king's words again. That voice had strength in it and kindness… Riku still couldn't believe in himself yet, but he felt like he could believe in what King Mickey told him.

"…Okay. I will, Your Majesty," he said softly and stepped toward the door.

He waited for Riku in the marble hall.

Silent.

A Nobody created him…so who was he?

There was no need to harbor such doubts.

What filled his heart were dark feelings.

He wasn't sure whether those were thoughts he'd been given or things that had been inside him all along.

The door opened.

The one who walked through was a boy who looked just like him.

"Huh?! What *are* you?" the newcomer blurted.

"Surprised?" he said, laughing.

"You're…" Riku glared at the boy in front of him.

"You should be surprised. After all, I look just like you!" *If I were in his*

place, I'd be shocked, he thought. "I am an exact replica of you that Vexen made from your data."

The boy who looked exactly like Riku—the Replica—gloated.

"So you're a fake me." Riku held up Soul Eater, ready to fight.

"…Not a 'fake'!" the Replica said through gritted teeth, looking clearly upset. "You think you're better just because you're the 'real' one? We have the same body and the same talents. But there is one easy way to tell us apart. Unlike you, I fear nothing!"

The Replica raised a sword that looked no different from Riku's Soul Eater.

"Are you…calling me a coward?" Riku snarled.

"You're afraid of the dark! You're so scared of the darkness inside yourself, you don't even know what to do!"

The Replica saw what was in his heart as if he could read it like a book. This fear of the darkness inside him—his terror. The Replica was a copy of Riku, body and mind, and he knew everything.

But the Replica didn't know what it was to feel fear. He didn't need to.

He had no self of his own—so he just had to become Riku.

If he became Riku and used the power of darkness the way it was meant to be used, then he would be better than the original.

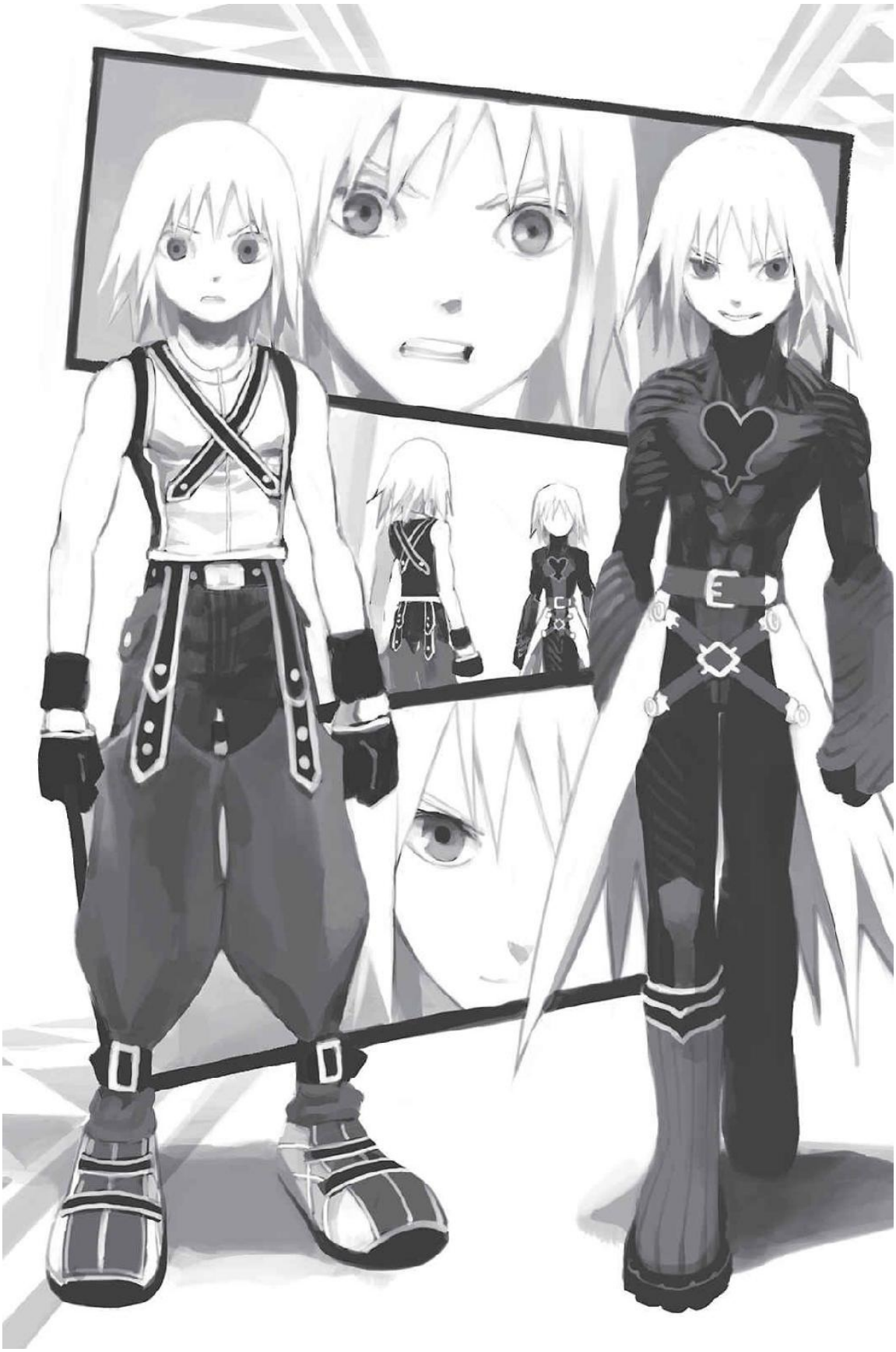
"I'm different," said the Replica. "I embrace the darkness. I can make it do whatever I want."

He was made to be one with the darkness. That was the whole meaning of his existence…

"So you'll never win against me!" the Replica crowed and leaped at Riku. The swords met with a *clang!* that he felt through his body. It was the first thing he'd ever felt—the proof that he was real.

Riku's eyes flashed as he looked at the Replica and furiously flung him back.

He's strong…



They should have had the same strength, and yet Riku was this strong.

Is it because I don't know how to use my power yet? Having fallen to his knees, the Replica got up again and glared at Riku.

"Hey, fake me…" Riku slowly walked toward him. "Thought I heard you say I'd never win against you."

Riku pointed Soul Eater at the Replica's throat.

"Hmph. Don't forget, I'm still new. I'll get stronger and stronger. It won't be long before I'm stronger than you," the Replica retorted, standing up tall. "So the next time we fight, you're finished!"

There's no way I'll lose. Because I'm not afraid of the darkness.

"There won't be a next time. I'd rather finish this now!" Riku was about to swing Soul Eater, but the Replica raised his sword, too. "Wha—?!"

Something flung Riku back, hard. A dark aura swirled around the Replica.

"*Ha-ha!* It's nice having darkness on my side. How can you be so scared of something that feels so thrilling? You really are missing out!" Laughing, he looked down at Riku.

"Enough!" Riku snapped.

"Hmph. So now the coward is playing tough. So long, Real Thing! Don't miss me too much!"

"Hey, wait!"

The Replica turned away and ran.

Riku was strong.

Much stronger than me, he thought. *But I'm him and he's me…*

I was so sure that if I could use the darkness better, I'd be stronger than the original. That was what Vexen told me, too.

The Replica kept running. It was the first time he ever had. It felt good. Everything did.

The fact that he had strength in himself, that he would be able to take the power of darkness…

This was fun.

"So, how was it, fighting the real thing?" said a voice from behind him.

The Replica came to a halt. "He's spineless. In no time at all, I'll be better than him," he replied quietly without turning to look at Vexen. A smile tugged at his mouth.

"In the meantime," said Vexen, "how would you like the opportunity to meet another hero?"

Another hero… He knew the name. It was in his memories. The hero of light…

“Sora, you mean? I heard he’s somewhere in the castle. You want me to take care of him?”

“We’ll see…but yes. I intend to make good use of you.”

Something in the way Vexen said that irritated him, but it didn’t matter now. He was supposed to be stronger than anyone else, and he wanted to test his power.

“No worries,” he said breezily. “The real Riku was nothing. Sora won’t be any match for me, either.”

“Then we’ll be going…aboveground.” Vexen placed his hand on the Replica’s shoulder. The air around them seemed to tremble, and the Replica closed his eyes.

I’m stronger… I won’t lose.

The voice that echoed in his heart—whose was it?

Is it mine or is it Riku’s?

“It looks as though they’ve made contact with the hero of light as well,” said Vexen.

The Replica looked up to see an enormous door. They must have teleported from the basement to the upper floors of the castle. “What’s through there…?”

“A gang of the organization’s underlings. They could stand to see your power, too.”

“…Got it.”

Seeing the Replica nod, Vexen opened the door.

Riku ran up the hall, trying to chase after the Replica. *I’m not about to lose to a fake like that…*

“Where are you?! Show yourself, fake!” he shouted. But the fake was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, a voice he knew echoed in the marble hall—Ansem. “Fake? No… that’s not exactly the right word.”

Riku stopped and turned to face him. “What would you call it? He’s just a copy of me. He said so himself.”

“In fact, he is more like a model, an example of what you are meant to be. He accepts the darkness—just like you once accepted me.” Ansem stood still in the center of the room. “But now you fear it. Perhaps that makes *you* the fake.”

“When have I been afraid of the dark?” Riku shot back, holding Soul Eater

ready.

I'm not afraid of it, he thought.

"Inside of the worlds created by those cards, you've grappled desperately with the darkness. Desperation is fear. You fight the darkness so fiercely because it is what frightens you."

I wasn't desperate. And I'm not afraid of the darkness. Riku told himself that and retorted aloud, "Hmph. You're too obvious. You want me to think that as long as I'm fighting the darkness I'll be afraid of it, so I should just stop fighting. Well, I'm not falling for it. I'll only keep fighting harder."

"Stubborn boy," Ansem said, unruffled, and tossed a few cards at him. "Continue your fight, then, if you must. Eventually you will learn. You cannot resist the darkness."

With a smirk, Ansem disappeared.

"…I can, too…resist the darkness," Riku mumbled, picking up the cards that had scattered on the floor.

If he didn't keep fighting against the darkness, he would lose his heart to it. To the darkness already within himself…

Riku still couldn't believe in himself. All that he could believe in was what the king told him.

But the fake—what did he have to believe in when he fought?

Through the door, there were two people dressed the same as Vexen, standing in front of a crystal ball much like the one in the basement.

"How could you let yourself be humbled by someone of such meager significance?" Vexen ranted. "You shame the organization."

The blonde, Larxene, looked down in a sulk.

"How can we help you, Vexen? It's not often we see you topside." It was the red-haired man, Axel, who spoke this time. But he didn't so much as glance at Vexen, keeping his gaze fixed on the crystal ball.

The Replica could see three silhouettes there. The memories in him told him that the trio was Sora and his friends.

"I came to lend you a hand," said Vexen. "You obviously believe this Sora has much potential, but I remain unconvinced he is truly worth such coddling. An experiment, I think, would show if he is really of any value to us."

"Hmph. Well, here we go again," Larxene remarked. "So it's an excuse for you to carry out your little experiments. That's all."

"I'm a scientist. Experiments are what I do, yes."

Paying no attention to the banter between Larxene and Vexen, the Replica moved closer to the crystal ball. Axel glanced at him with a faint smile.

"Whatever. You can do what you want," Axel told Vexen. "But you know, I get the feeling that testing Sora is just a way for you to test your valet."

The Replica looked up. *Valet… I'm Vexen's servant?*

"Valet? He's the product of pure research," Vexen retorted.

"He's a toy. That's what he is," Larxene shot back, cutting off any further explanation.

I'm…a valet, and a product of research, and a toy…, the Replica thought. *But I don't really care what anyone says. All I have to do is become stronger than the real one and defeat them.*

"Hmph. You could stand to keep your mouth shut about things you don't understand," Vexen snapped.

"Anyway… Since you came all the way up here, you're gonna want this. A humble gift for my elder! I hope you use it to put on a good show for us." With a cocky smile, Axel tossed something to him. "Here—a card."

"Oh, how very helpful of you. Well, then, I'll be using that… Come along."

At Vexen's order, the Replica went to join him. "It's just a card. What good is that?"

"That card holds the memories of Sora and Riku's home," said Axel.

What could that mean…? The Replica stared at the card in Vexen's hand.

"With that and a little help from Naminé, you'll have all the real Riku's memories. We can even get her to make you forget that you're nothing but a fake." Larxene spoke quickly and easily, leaning her face close to the Replica's. "In other words, we'll remake your heart so you can be *just* the same as the real Riku. 'Kay?"

"You want to remake my heart?! The real Riku is a wimp who's afraid of the dark—afraid of himself!" the Replica shouted. "What do I want with the heart of a loser like that?!"

Even if they're just faint memories, he thought, *I don't want any more memories from that coward! They'll just make my heart weaker!*

As if she hadn't heard him at all, Larxene turned back to Vexen. "Any objections, Vexen? You do want to use him to test Sora, don't you?"

"It must be done."

"How can you?! Vexen, you're betraying me?!" the Replica cried. He wanted to stay as he was. He didn't want to share any more memories with Riku.

"I told you I would make good use of you, didn't I?"

“Relax, kiddo,” said Larxene. “It probably won’t even hurt that much!”

“I’ll hurt *you*!” The Replica rushed at Larxene with his sword. She easily knocked him back.

“Stupid little toy! You think you *could* hurt me? Where would you ever get a thought like that? But hey—look on the bright side. Naminé will erase the memory of me knocking you flat, along with everything else in your head. Instead, she’ll implant the loveliest little memories you could ever hope for! Who cares if they’re all lies? No big deal!”

Darkness…began to surround him.

“No, don’t…” The darkness came in, covering his mind. “NO!”

It swallowed up everything, even the sound of his own scream.

CHAPTER 4

REPLICA

CHAPTER 4

REPLICA

HE WAS INSIDE THE DARKNESS, thick and black as ink.

Where am I?

I can't see anything. I can't hear anything.

Who am I?

He could see himself. The boy looked over his body.

Blue pants and a yellow shirt. Black gloves and black wristbands. His hair, he could just see it—that was silver.

This is…me?

But something felt terribly off. It didn't feel like this was his own body.

Except it was. He was in it.

The boy began walking.

Everything around him was pitch-dark. He couldn't even tell whether he was really moving.

But feeling like he had to keep going anyway, the boy walked.

"The door will soon open," he heard a voice say.

"Who's there?!" he shouted and then touched his own throat in surprise. *That's what I sound like?*

"You have nothing to fear. There is no need to fear the darkness. Now, go… Hero of darkness."

It felt like he'd heard this voice before somewhere. But he couldn't remember who it might be.

Actually…he couldn't remember anything at all.

Out of nowhere, light opened up in front of him. The boy shut his eyes against the dazzling brightness.

Then a soft rush of sound came. Was it…the ocean?

Slowly, he opened his eyes to see a wide expanse of blue water. The waves lapped at a beach of sand nearly as white as the sea foam.

Two boys and two girls sat on the shore, leaning close together as they talked.

He was not far away, but they didn’t seem to notice him at all.

“Why do we always do what Riku says!” The brown-haired boy angrily sprang to his feet and ran off.

“Sora, wait!” The red-haired girl went after him.

So the brown-haired boy’s name was Sora.

The two left behind were a boy with silver hair and a girl with light blond hair.

The silver-haired boy…was dressed the same as himself. Blue pants, a yellow shirt. Black gloves and wristbands. Silver hair, that was the same, too. And his eyes were blue.

“Naminé, aren’t you going after him, too?” The silver-haired boy stood up and brushed sand from his pants.

“But if I do, then you’ll be all alone, Riku,” the girl called Naminé replied in a tiny voice, still sitting. She held a sketchbook and crayons.

“I don’t mind being alone,” said Riku and turned away from her.

“But Sora has Kairi…and you’ve got me.”

“Huh?” Riku looked at Naminé again.

A bit of color had come into her cheeks. She giggled softly. “Riku, can I draw your face?”

She laid out the crayons beside her and opened the sketchbook. Scribble, scribble—and like magic the blank white page gave way to Riku’s smile.

Riku and Naminé laughed together.

“Hey…you kids…,” said the boy with no name.

But the moment he spoke—the world spun into nothing.

He slept inside a huge pod.

A man in a black cloak with a hood pulled up over his head stood there.

The boy opened his eyes. Seeing him awake, the man pushed back his hood, revealing long, dull blond hair and a sallow face.

Conversion – 13 percent complete

The three of them ran up the seashore.

Three—Kairi and Sora and him.

“Wait up, Sora!” he shouted.

Kairi was chasing Sora, and he was behind them. Maybe they were playing

tag.

"Hurry up, Riku!" Kairi called over her shoulder.

It was the same name as that silver-haired boy on the beach.

Am I…Riku? Is that my name?

Then…that boy was me?

"C'mon, Riku! You're such a slowpoke!" Sora yelled, far ahead.

So it's true… I'm Riku?

But his vision went strange, warped, and he stopped. The soughing of the waves turned ugly in his ears.

No—it wasn't the sea. He couldn't hear that anymore. This was something weirder. What was that noise?

Then he saw nothing but gray…and he fell again into nothingness.

The boy stood in front of a little cave.

He could hear an awful sound…like something enormous growling.

But…wasn't the sound he'd been hearing something uglier?

"*Ssh.* Quiet…" He turned to look at the other boy behind him—that was Sora. "We've gotta be careful…"

So they were about to go inside.

Right… Sora had been saying there was a monster in the cave, so they'd come together to try and catch it.

That was a huge adventure for us back then.

The ceiling of the cave had a great big hole in it. The blue sky leaked in.

"See? It was just the wind making that noise."

"Aw, that's all? I wish it was a monster!" Sora folded his hands behind his head, sighing with overblown disappointment.

The wind began to blow over the cave again, moaning and howling.

"Huh? Wait, what's that over there?" Sora ran to the back of the cave as if he'd spotted something.

"A window… No, wait, it's bigger than that…" Unhurried, the boy followed Sora. "A door…?"

There was a big door. One that looked familiar. He must have seen it before…somewhere…but where…?

He looked at it closely, but there was no doorknob or keyhole to be found. "There's no way to open it, though," he said, looking back at Sora, who kicked at a pebble.

Sora was a year younger than him, but sometimes, the boy thought, he really

acted like a little kid.

“Hey, Sora,” he said. “When we grow up, let’s get off this island. We’ll go on real adventures, not this kid stuff!”

Sora looked at him and grinned. The wind raised another terrible growl.

The boy looked behind him again. The door began to shine with golden light…and then that light swallowed him up.

It hurt. His heart hurt, his breath hurt. Why did it have to hurt this much?

He was in a dim chamber. Everything was lavishly decorated, but still, it felt lonely somehow.

The boy clutched at his chest, gasping with the pain.

“Riku…”

At the sound of that name he looked up suddenly to see a tall woman clothed all in black.

She held a staff in her hand, and her cape fluttered with every step. Some kind of awful smell was clinging to her.

“Remember, relying too heavily on the dark powers could cost you your heart,” she said.

That seems to be your problem, he tried to say, but the words stuck in his throat.

Why was he thinking like that? How did he know her, anyway?

Because I’m the one called Riku…?

He didn’t know. He didn’t understand anything.

The boy floated inside the pod.

“Do you understand me, Replica?”

Hearing the voice, he slowly opened his eyes. There in front of him was the man in a black cloak with long dull hair. The cold, cruel smile that clung to his lips gave the boy a terrible shivery feeling.

“You will become stronger,” said the man, “because whatever power that hero of darkness has will be yours.”

At that, the boy closed his eyes again.

Conversion – 35 percent complete

“Hey, Riku… Suppose you get to another world. What would you do there?” Kairi said, staring into the sunset.

Sora stood behind her. In the middle of the trio sat the little raft.

The white sand…the sound of the waves. It was that island.

The boy already recognized that name as his own. *Riku…that’s my name.*

And yet something just felt a little bit off.

“Do you just want to see, like Sora?” Kairi asked.

The boy mulled it over for a moment and replied, “Well, I haven’t really thought about it. It’s just… I’ve always wondered why we’re here on this island. If there are other worlds out there, why did we end up on this one?”

He squinted against the brilliance of the sinking sun.

“And suppose there are other worlds,” he went on. “Then ours is just a little piece of something much greater… So, we could have just as easily ended up

somewhere else, right?”

This tiny world on these little islands. He wanted to see other places. He wanted to know why they were in a place like this.

“That’s why we need to go out there and find out. Just sitting here won’t change a thing.” He started walking down slowly toward the shore. “It’s the same old stuff. And I want to go.”

“You’ve been thinking a lot lately, haven’t you?”

The hint of sadness he heard in Kairi’s voice—was it just his imagination?

“Thanks to you,” he said. “If you hadn’t come here, I probably never would have thought of any of this.”

Right…I really liked Kairi. She was special to me.

But Kairi liked Sora.

I always knew that.

“Thanks, Kairi,” he told her.

In that moment he had really wanted to tell Kairi how he felt. But he couldn’t do it.

“I’ll make it so the girl is yours.”

The voice whispered to him from somewhere. He turned. “Who was that?!”

Before he knew it the sea had turned black as ink.

“What is it that you want?”

Whoever it was seemed to murmur right next to his ear.

Around him the ground turned black, too. Darkness was spreading out from him. And then it covered him completely.

“I’ll make your wishes come true.”

He didn’t want someone else to grant his wishes. He wanted to earn those things for himself.

But back then…I wanted Kairi to be mine, no matter what it took.

I did? No… It was Riku who wanted that, willing to do whatever it took.

Everything faded into black.

It was his own room in the castle. Maleficent’s castle—Hollow Bastion.

“Kairi… Sora…”

He decided he would do anything to get Kairi’s heart back. Even if it meant getting his hands dirty with darkness.

The boy rose from the bed and walked out. If he climbed the stairs to the tall tower, he would reach the small balcony at the very top. He liked to look out on the view from there.

It felt like there was a gaping hole in his heart where the wind blew through. Like he was the only person in the whole wide world…

The cold wind brushed at his cheeks.

When he woke up, he was standing on the beach.

Sora peered into Naminé's sketchbook. "That doesn't look like me at all!"

Naminé looked up at him anxiously. She was drawing a portrait of Sora in her sketchbook. But apparently there was something about it that Sora didn't like.

"I think it does," said the boy as he looked at the drawing. It captured Sora's pouty face perfectly.

"It does *not*!" Sora yanked the sketchbook out of Naminé's hand.

"Sora! Give it back!" she cried, but not before Sora began ripping apart the pages.

"Hey! Sora?!" the boy shouted.

Right before their eyes the sketchbook was getting torn to shreds.

"You're so mean…" Naminé crouched down, trying to gather up the shreds of paper. But Sora shoved her and stomped on the pieces.

"How could you…? Sora, I… I don't ever want to see you again!" she shouted, starting to cry.

"Sora, I don't ever want to see you again!"

And then everything faded.

"You're serious?" Larxene said a little condescendingly.

"Of course…" Vexen knocked on the panel.

Beside him, Naminé gazed at the boy in the pod.

"I'm so sorry…"

She had no idea whether her quiet murmur could reach him.

Conversion – 43 percent complete

The boy was in a marble hall. It seemed to be part of a great big castle.

"Where am I…?"

He looked around. He couldn't remember ever seeing a place like this before.

A door opened, and he sensed another presence. Someone came running up to him.

"Riku! Is it really you?!"

That voice… It was Sora.

And his own name was Riku.

Repeating that name in his mind, he looked at Sora, who looked ready to run up and grab him in a bear hug—but he stopped short.

The boy felt like there was a thick fog over his memory. *How…did I get here?*

"What're *you* doing here?" Sora blurted.

"Not happy to see me? Let me know if I'm getting in the way of something more *important*."

The words tumbled out effortlessly, but they made him uneasy. The boy snorted at Sora. *No…we got separated…and we were looking for each other…* Something like that?

And now, we're both looking for Naminé.

That was the basic outline… Wait, *outline*?

The way the word *outline* came into his head made him feel uncertain, but he kept glaring at Sora anyway.

"Huh? I didn't mean that…" Sora hung his head.

"Hmph. Never mind the excuses. I bet you'd all but forgotten about me." The boy was speaking about Sora, but it was really out of frustration with his own memory.

"Are you crazy?" Sora protested. "C'mon, I came all this way looking for *you*!"

"But you're not anymore, are you?" said the boy. "Now the only one you're trying to find is Naminé. You don't care about me."

"That's not true!" Sora burst out.

Sora, you never think of anything but Naminé, the boy thought. *I was the same…but you have Kairi.*

So why can't you just let me have Naminé?!

"Well, Sora, you never gave a thought to her feelings, did you?"

"Naminé's…?" said Sora, as if that surprised him.

"Ha. I knew it. You don't really care about her, either. Just because you want to see Naminé—well, it doesn't go both ways. But that wouldn't have crossed your mind, huh?"

"But…," Sora stammered.

Why would she want to see you after what you did to her?

"In fact, Naminé doesn't even want to look at your face," Riku added.

"Why not?!"

The boy understood, then, that Sora must have begun to lose his memory, too.

But even so…Sora was forgetting too much. Such important things… important memories.

Sora was on the verge of forgetting everything. *Even about me,* the boy thought.

But he didn't even understand how he knew that Sora was losing his memory. That made him more uncertain about himself.

I hate Sora.

Naminé doesn't want to see him, either.

Those were the only definite facts he had.

"You should ask your memories…about why Naminé disappeared from the islands. If you remembered that, you'd know."

"Did I… Did I do something? Is it my fault?" asked Sora. "Riku…?"

"Go home, Sora. I'll take care of Naminé. Anyone who goes near her…has to go through *me*!" The boy raised his sword at Sora. Darkness enveloped him, and he felt strength course into his body.

"What—what's wrong with you?!" cried Sora. "We're supposed to be friends!"

"Please, Sora. Since when did you ever care about me? Naminé's not the only one who got sick of looking at you. So did I!" he shot back and leaped at Sora.

Why don't I want to see Sora? Why am I so angry?

His heart was full of doubts and questions—but he swung his sword anyway.

"Riku, stop it!" Just in time, Sora blocked his strike with the Keyblade. "… *Ngh!"*

"So, you've gotten a little bit stronger, huh?"

The Sora he remembered had always lost when they fought.

"What do you mean you're sick of looking at me?" Sora yelled. "Why would you say that?!"

"Hmph… Because I was holding it in until now, that's all. I've never liked you, you know."

Never…? Even as those words left him, he felt reluctant to say them. *I really never liked Sora at all?*

He wasn't sure. He just couldn't remember.

"If you're serious…then I'm fighting for real, too…!" Sora brought the Keyblade down on him.

He barely managed to block. Sora was strong. And it was true strength.

“Hey, are you sure I got stronger, or are you slipping?” The slight smile that Sora showed him—it was the best sort of smile, the kind you give to someone you care about, and the boy felt bewildered.

He didn’t understand how Sora could smile like that at him. He didn’t understand it, and that made him sad and resentful. It hurt.

The memories…the feelings in him were all muddled and confused.

“Riku!” Sora was driving him back. The boy shoved away and ran.

I don’t understand.… And for him the lack of understanding was terror.

He wanted to run away from here. He wanted to go somewhere else.

Somewhere…far away.

Larxene and Vexen loomed over the boy collapsed on the floor in the corridor.

“Ugh, I *told* you he wasn’t ready yet,” said Larxene, prodding the boy with her foot. “This is all your fault for rushing things, Vexen.”

“I seem to recall *you* saying that Sora had already made it into that floor.” Vexen hoisted up the boy’s limp body and turned away from her.

Larxene folded her arms. “Now, what are you doing?” she asked as if it could hardly concern her.

“His memory is still in the process of being rewritten… And if the helix of his memories should break down in the midst of that process, the Replica himself will break down. Isn’t that so, Naminé?”

“Yes…,” Naminé’s tiny voice replied. She stared at the boy who was white as a sheet.

“So, all we have to do is complete his memories and send him to do battle with the hero,” said Vexen and left with Naminé in tow.

Make it stop.…

Feeling as if she heard a feeble voice, Naminé turned.

“…Replica…?”

“What is it, Naminé?” Vexen asked.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, then followed him.

CHAPTER 51
RIVAL

CHAPTER 5

RIVAL

RIKU RAN. AND SOMEWHERE IN THE CITY STREETS he ran down, there was a place he knew.

He had come here once with Maleficent.

Traverse Town. A city of meetings…and he had crossed paths with Sora here.

It was always full of people, a bustling lively city.

Riku stopped and peered into a little window where warm light streamed out. That time…he'd seen Sora smiling. Sora laughing with his new friends… Riku didn't really want to remember it.

All that filled his heart was regret. Why hadn't he done something then…?

The boy stood beside the small brick house. Light spilled from the window into the dim streets.

Sora was inside. The boy stared intently at the scene.

"You see? It's just as I told you. While you toiled away trying to find your dear friend, he quite simply replaced you with some new companions."

A woman was speaking from behind him—Maleficent.

I just stood there, gazing into the window, and I couldn't move. I could see Sora laughing with his friends. He hadn't found Kairi yet, but he was smiling all the same.

Smiling with other people who weren't us.

I was just so angry…and lonely…and sad…

"Evidently, he values them far more than he does you," murmured Maleficent.

Is that true? Maybe it is.

Maybe Sora's already forgotten about me.

About me…? Me? Who's me?

"You're better off without that wretched boy. Now, think no more of him, and come with me. I'll help you find what you're searching for…Riku."

Right. I’m Riku.

I’m best friends with Sora and Kairi… Wait—we had one more friend.

Who was it? I can’t remember…

The gloom of the city street slowly grew, staining everything…and darkness enveloped the boy.

Naminé sat on the sandy beach, drawing pictures. Sora and himself and Kairi grinned up from her sketchbook.

“How come you’re not in the picture, Naminé?” said the boy, peering at the page.

“Because…I can’t see my own face.”

“Oh.” The boy thought that was kind of sad.

Of course Naminé can’t see herself when she’s together with us, laughing. That’s just the way it is, but…

“How about I draw you, then?”

“Huh?”

The boy picked up Naminé’s crayons and started drawing.

Himself and Naminé smiling. A great big shining sun over their heads.

We were always laughing together. The two of us… We were happy.

“How’s this?” The boy showed her the sketchbook page, where he’d drawn their laughing faces.

It wasn’t anywhere near as good as Naminé’s drawing, but she smiled sweetly. “Thanks, Riku.”

The sound of the waves on the shore was so nice… The moment he thought that, shouting rang out from somewhere.

“Wha…?”

The boy turned, and suddenly, beneath his feet, the scene changed from the sandy beach to a cliff…and an enormous beast was after him.

He desperately leaped out of the way and then slashed out at the beast with the sword in his hand. Growling, it fell.

“Riku! Stop!”

It was Sora shouting at him. Slowly he turned.

“So you finally made it. About time. I’ve been waiting for you, Sora.” The boy looked down at him, speaking calmly. “We’ve always been rivals, haven’t we? You’ve always pushed me, and I’ve always pushed you.”

That’s right…we were always fighting. Scrambling after everything, against one another.

“But it all ends here,” he went on. “There can’t be two chosen ones.”

“What are you talking about?”

He smiled faintly at Sora. *I’m…strong,* he told himself. *I’m going to protect Naminé and Kairi. I’m going to protect this world.*

“Let the Keyblade choose its true master!” the boy said and reached out his hand.

The Keyblade shook in Sora’s grasp, as if an implacable force tried to drag it away from him. With a flash of light, it disappeared.

And then, the boy’s fingers closed tight around the shining Keyblade.

“You don’t have what it takes to save Kairi. It’s up to me. Only the Keyblade master can open the secret door…and change the world.” He lifted the Keyblade high, pointing it skyward. And then, darkness spread out from it, and the world spun and tilted.

Gasping for breath as he ran, the boy asked himself why.

He’d made the Keyblade his. But it had returned to Sora.

Is Sora really stronger than me…? Or is it something else?

We were always rivals. And I always won.

Except when it was about that…about Kairi.

Maybe I’m really no match for him, after all…

“Know this.” The voice came from close behind him. “The heart that is strong and true shall win the Keyblade.”

“Who’s there?!” He whirled to see a man in a dark hooded cloak.

“The Keyblade chooses. And it will not choose one without a strong heart.”

“Are you saying my heart’s weaker than his?!”

“For that instant, it was.”

The boy looked down in frustration. The hooded man stepped closer.

“However, you can become stronger. You showed no fear in stepping through the Door of Darkness. It held no terror for you. Plunge deeper into the darkness…and your heart will grow even stronger.”

The boy shook his head. “What should I do…?”

“It’s really quite simple. Open yourself to the darkness—that is all.” The man slowly raised a hand toward him, and a dark glow surrounded his body. “Let your heart itself become all-encompassing darkness…”

And as the man spoke, the boy felt the power within him.

Power to defeat anyone. The power of darkness.

With darkness on my side…I’ll never lose.

And then the boy kept running.

He was in the darkness again.

Nothing but pitch-black darkness. He had no idea which way to go.

His existence, his voice, his heart…it felt like everything would be swallowed up by the darkness.

Had he been here before…? The boy cocked his head.

The boy heard a voice call out. “Riku!”

Right… My name is Riku…

“Riku!”

He listened for the voice in the darkness. Who was it…?

He weakly opened his eyes, and sunlight streamed in. Too bright…

“Riku!”

“Whoa!”

Naminé’s face suddenly appeared in front of his eyes. He sat bolt upright.

“Don’t scare me like that, Naminé.”

“Aw, you’re the one who got scared, Riku,” said Naminé, but she looked a little sad. “You seemed kind of upset, that’s all.”

“I was dreaming… Some kind of dark thing was giving me this power…”

“Well, I bet you’ll get stronger on your own.” But even as she said that, there was still a trace of sorrow in her face.

“Sora will, too,” the boy replied.

Naminé shook her head. “No… You’re going to be the stronger one. Besides, Sora is… Hey, Riku?”

“What?”

The boy stood up, brushing sand from his pants.

“What if I tell him…? What if I tell Sora it’s his fault I’m leaving the islands…?”

“What’re you talking about, Naminé? You’re not going anywhere,” the boy laughed.

She won’t go anywhere. We’re all going to stay on the islands and keep playing together.

“Actually, I…”

Bit by bit, Naminé seemed to fade in front of him.

“Hey—Naminé?!”

“…I’m sorry, Riku… I mean… Rep…li……”

“Naminé?!” he cried. But then, he fell once more into darkness.

Naminé stood in front of the machinery.

There wasn't very much left. Only a little more tweaking to do with his memory… But…

The moment she reached out to touch the panel, someone spoke from behind her. Naminé's shoulders jumped.

"What are you doing, Naminé? You weren't about to mess with that fake's memories on your own time, were you?"

Slowly Naminé turned around to see who addressed her.

It was Larxene, standing there with a little smirk. "Cat got your tongue again?"

Naminé turned away again and looked at the boy's face displayed on the monitor.

Conversion – 87 percent complete

"Go, guys!" Kairi shouted.

The clack of wooden swords meeting echoed down the beach.

The boy blocked Sora's attack with a cocky smile. "Gotcha!" he cried and flung Sora back.

Sora went sprawling onto the sand and then found the end of the other boy's wooden sword at his throat.

"Aw, man…" Sora sighed and raised his hands in surrender.

"You've still got a ways to go, huh, Sora?" said the boy, grinning, and grasped Sora's hand to help him up.

Sora grinned back and let the boy pull him to his feet. "Watch out! I'll beat you next time!"

"Yeah, you think so?" the boy replied with a smirk and threw his wooden sword on the beach.

They always had sword fights, but actually, the swords were just pieces of driftwood that had washed ashore. Neither of them had ever touched a real blade.

Selphie had been watching their battle, too. She ran over to them. "Gee, Riku, you're really good!"

"My turn next!" Tidus picked up the piece of driftwood from the sand.

"All right! I got you this time!" Still clutching the stick in his hand, Sora raised it at Tidus.

The boy watched them, his spirits high.

The boy stood in the unending darkness.

“Again…?”

He didn’t know how many times he’d been standing here like this.

What made the deepest impression in his uncertain memory was only this inky expanse of darkness.

Amid that, Sora and Kairi and Naminé would float up and vanish.

“You’ll wake up soon,” someone said.

The boy looked around.

“What is your name?” asked the voice out of the darkness.

“My name is…Riku.” As he answered, he could see a light up ahead of him.

“Then, close the door, and come forward.”

“How? What’s happening?”

“Go and you will understand.”

The boy obeyed and began to run toward the light.

The source of the glow was an enormous door, from where light shone out. He stood in front of it and tried with all his might to pull it closed.

“This is like…”

The moment he said that, his vision warped and swam.

“Huh…?”

When he came to, he was pushing with all his might on an enormous door.

We changed places…? No, that’s not right… This is me.

“Take care of her, Sora,” the boy told the one on the other side of the door.

He couldn’t really see, but it felt like Sora nodded.

I can leave Kairi to Sora… And I’ll protect Naminé.

Just as the door inched closed, a terrible roaring sound rose up. The ground beneath their feet began to crumble… And then a rain of light was falling. Shooting stars blazed across the sky. The boy looked up at them in a daze.

These shooting stars are just like…

“Riku… I’m scared.”

They were standing on the island’s little dock—him and Naminé—looking up at the sky together.

That sky was full of shooting stars, far too many to count, falling like a deluge of light.

“Just now, were you…?”

“I’m scared…”

The boy tried to tell Naminé that something was strange, but seeing her so

afraid, he clammed up. *Was I only dreaming?*

“It’s all right… I’ll protect you,” he said.

“Really? What if a falling star hits the island?”

“If any falling stars come this way, I’ll protect you!” He grinned at her.

“…Promise?” Naminé said in her tiny voice.

“I promise,” he told her steadily.

Then, at last, she smiled…and held out a star-shaped pendant for him. “Here… So you don’t forget our promise.”

It was a charm made out of a paopu fruit.

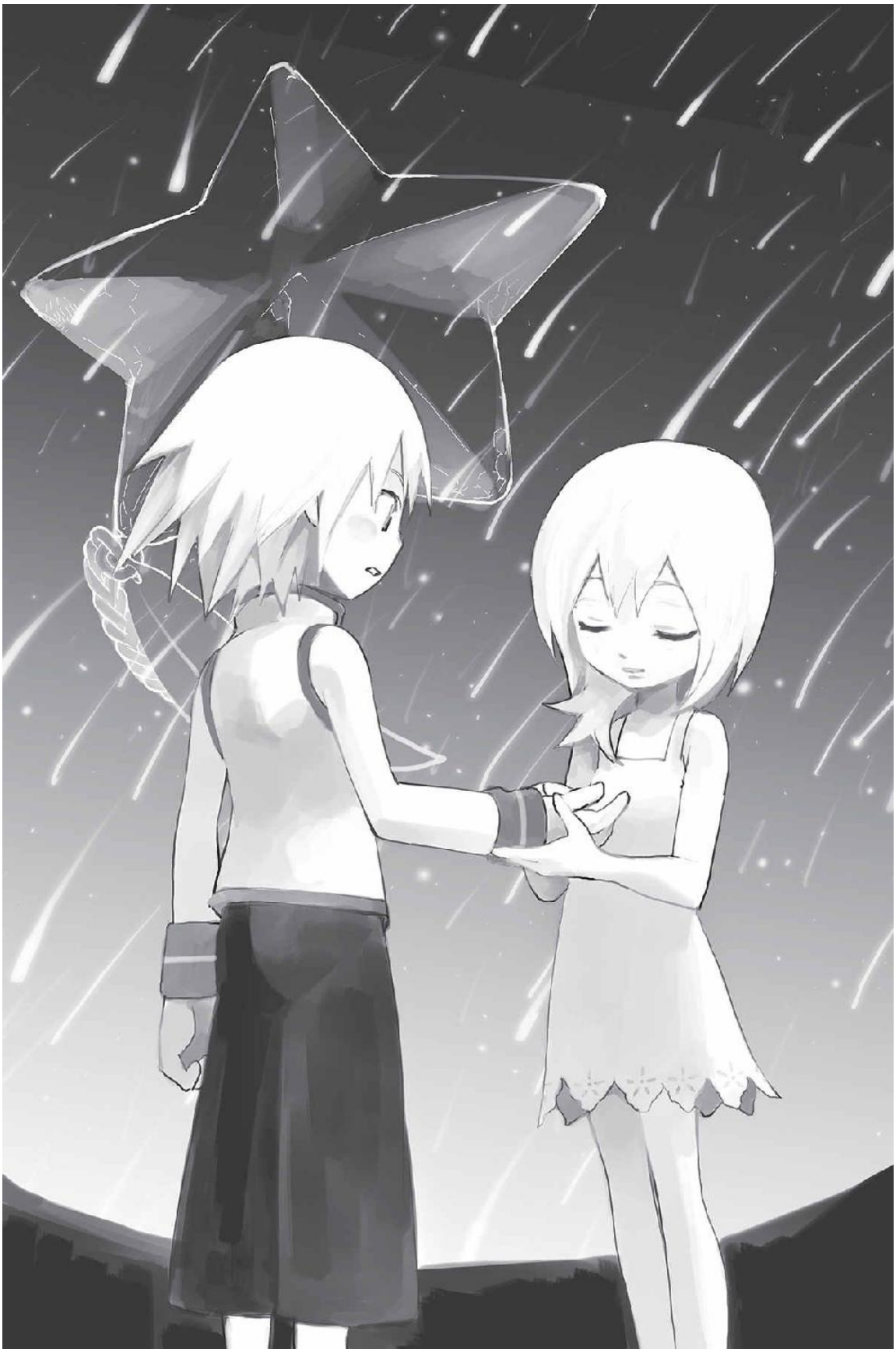
“They say that if you wear this kind of fruit, you’ll never ever be parted from the one you love,” she said.

“That’s just…,” the boy started but took the pendant and looped it around his neck.

“So, no matter what happens, we’ll always be able to find each other again.” Namine smiled…and her smile blurred again in his vision.

The sound of the waves rushed sweetly in his ears.

Watching the sunset from the islet, the boy let his thoughts wander. What was she doing these days, that girl whose name sounded soft like the waves?



The boy stared at the good luck charm she had given him.

“Hey, Riku, whatcha got?” Sora poked his head over and peered at the star-shaped thing in the palm of Riku’s hand. “Wow, it’s a paopu fruit!”

The boy tucked away the charm, trying to hide it from Sora, and stared out at the ocean again.

“C’mon, what’s the big deal? It is, isn’t it?”

“…None of your business.”

For some reason, Sora just didn’t remember Naminé at all.

Probably because he didn’t want to remember what a horrible thing he’d done, the boy thought. Because Naminé had left soon after that day…when Sora tore up her sketchbook.

And every time the boy thought of Naminé…he hated Sora’s cheerfulness just a little bit more.

“Lemme see!”

“No.”

Sora poked at him until he found the charm. “Huh? It’s a pendant?”

“Give it back!”

“Who gave it to you?” Sora taunted, running away with it clutched in his hand.

“Quit it!” he shouted, and just then Sora tripped. The charm fell to the ground. The boy picked it up and glared angrily. “You know, Sora, you’re out of line.”

“What? You’re the one trying to keep it a secret! You don’t wanna tell me because a girl gave it to you, huh?”

Sora always seemed to read his mind without even trying, barging in on his heart. The boy hated that about him.

It wasn’t that he really hated Sora… But he just couldn’t be that straightforward himself, and he envied that, so much it made him sick…

The boy gazed at the charm in the light of the setting sun.

Conversion – 100 percent complete

A yellow star-shaped charm made from a paopu fruit rested in the palm of his hand.

“Where am I…?”

The boy—the Replica—regained consciousness. He was standing in a room made all of marble. But he had the unnerving sense of something not quite right.

“What’s the matter, Naminé?”

Hearing that name, the Replica looked up.

Naminé… Right. Yes, that was it.

“Why so glum? Is there something troubling you?” Larxene teased. “You feel just awful about tinkering with Sora’s memory—is that it? Or *maybe*—”

The boy stepped right in front of her. “Cut it out, Larxene. Naminé doesn’t want to remember Sora.”

“Oh… I get it.” Larxene shrugged.

“Don’t worry,” he told Naminé. “Whatever’s hurting you, I’ll make it go away. I swear on the good luck charm you gave me.”

She only looked at the Replica with her eyes full of sorrow.

“See you,” he said and left the room.

Another marble hall—by now it was a familiar scene.

The Replica kept on waiting for Sora.

This time…he had to defeat Sora. That thought and nothing else filled up his mind.

At the slight sound of footsteps, he looked up and said, “Can’t you take a hint, Sora? I told you to go home.”

Sora stopped, smiling at him. “Not till I rescue you and Naminé!”

“I don’t remember ever asking you to rescue me.” The Replica raised his sword.

That’s right—we don’t need to be rescued! he thought. *I’m going to stay here in Castle Oblivion, with Naminé…*

“But Kairi’s waiting for you to come home!” That was one of the king’s retainers, from behind Sora—Goofy, that was it.

“Kairi…,” the Replica murmured. That girl was so faint in his memory.

But I have Naminé, he told himself.

“That’s right! Kairi’s waiting,” said Sora.

The Replica snorted. Riku snorted. “You’re the one who forgot. I told you, when we closed the door to Kingdom Hearts…‘Take care of Kairi.’ Give it up. I’m not going back to the islands. Not for anything.”

“It’s not just for Kairi!” said Sora, still trying desperately. “What about all our other friends?!”

All our other friends—maybe there had been some others, too. But, like Kairi, he could hardly remember them at all.

“You can have those losers,” the Replica shrugged. “I already forgot ’em.”

“Hey! That’s enough!” Sora shouted.

“What about you, Sora? Do you actually remember what they all look like? Their voices?”

“Of course I remem—” Sora started and broke off.

So Sora was losing some of his memories, too. That made the Replica feel just a little bit better. *It’s not just me—it’s this place making our memories all foggy.*

“Don’t feel bad. That’s what this castle does to you after a while,” the Replica told him, smirking. “It’s great. You forget all the useless stuff and remember for the first time what really matters. And I remembered, Sora. Now I know the one thing that’s the most important to me.”

“*Useless* stuff?!”

The Replica didn’t let him say any more. “I’m going to stay here and protect Naminé. Nothing else matters.”

Sora stared at him hard, and then, for some reason, smiled. “Hey, Riku… I think I’ll jog your memory.” As he spoke he raised the Keyblade.

“You can try.” The Replica readied his sword, too.

“Donald, Goofy…!” Sora called.

“*Wak!* Okay, we get it!” The king’s retainers ran to a corner.

“Just between us, huh?” the Replica taunted.

“That’s right. One-on-one!” Sora replied, determined, and leaped high in the air.

The Replica blocked his strike, but the strength in it made his hands tingle.

“Don’t you remember, Riku? We were always fighting like this on the beach!”

“*Hmph.* I remember you losing!” The Replica pushed the Keyblade away and swung his sword.

“Then you can remember…more than that!” Sora cried.

They attacked and blocked and countered over and over until they were both out of breath.

“C’mon, Riku! Remember!”

Their weapons clashed with a tremendous clang and the Replica’s sword went spinning through the air.

“Rgh…” He fell to one knee.

“Riku…”

“Too bad, Sora. I’m not remembering a thing.” Wavering, he stood up again. “But we can keep fighting if you want.”

But, seeing him like that, Sora didn’t want to. He reached out his hand to the Replica. “C’mon, Riku… Never mind fighting. Let’s go help Naminé.”

“Together…?” Riku shoved his hand aside. “Yeah, right. That’s just like you—always barging in on my heart!”

“What’s *that* mean?!” Sora demanded.

I’ll never forget…what you did to me that day, when you’d already forgotten about Naminé.

“*Hmph.* You forgot that, too? You never cared. It never mattered to you!” With that the Replica turned away and ran up the stairs through the next door.

His memories with Naminé…and the good luck charm.

But why do I hate Sora so much? …Why?

Clutching her sketchbook to her chest, Naminé gazed on the image of the boys in the great crystal ball.

Axel went to her side. “…You have my sympathies. From the heart.”

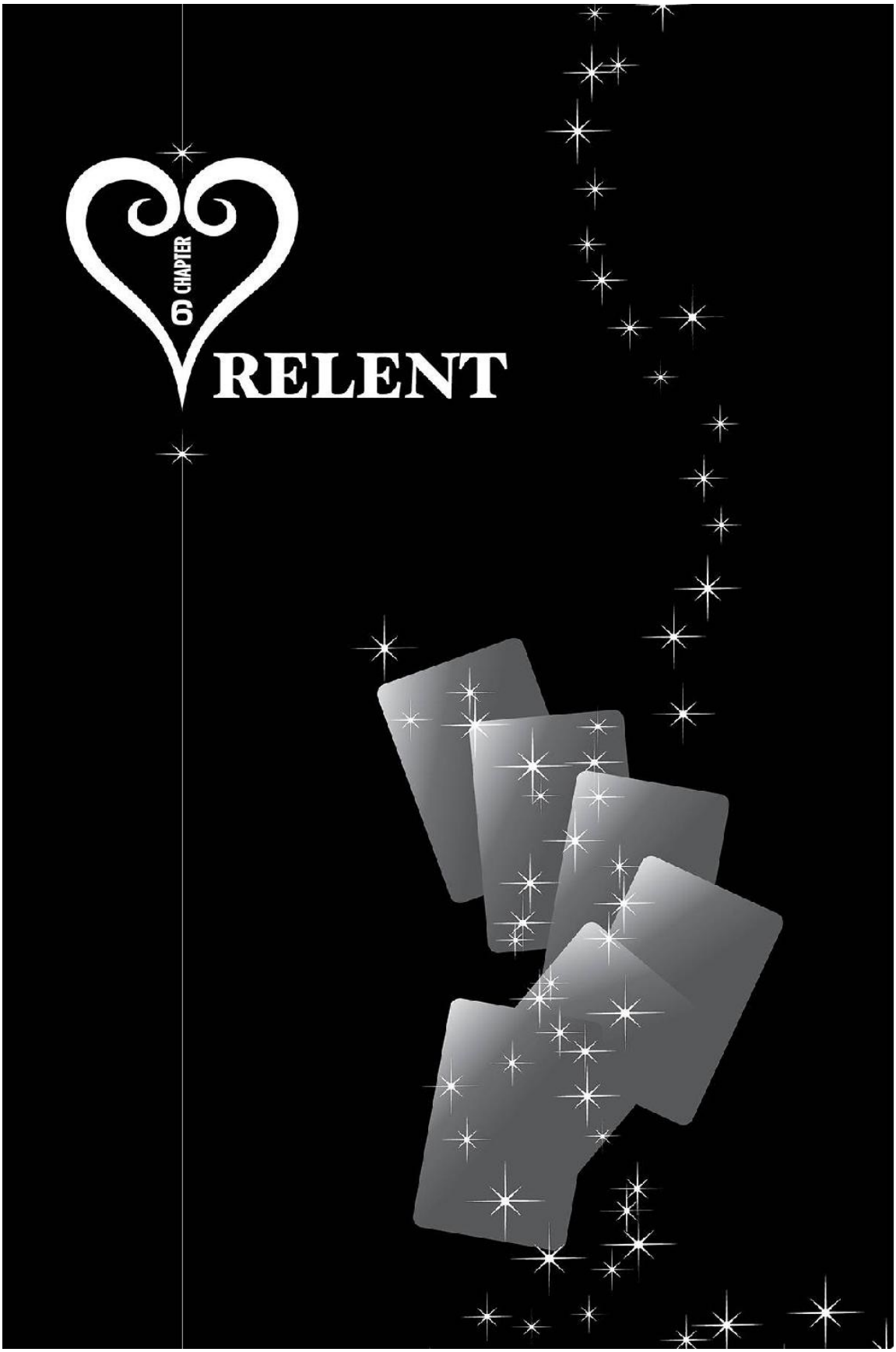
She looked up at him.

“But don’t waste your time,” he said. “We Nobodies can never hope to be somebodies.”

Naminé’s gaze dropped again. *All of this is my fault… Because of what I did.*

“Say, Naminé,” Axel murmured closely, as if he didn’t want to be overheard. “Isn’t there something else you can do?”

But she only stared at her lap, motionless as a doll.


CHAPTER 6
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CHAPTER 6

RELENT

“HEY, FAKE— ER, RIKU.”

As the Replica fled from his defeat, a red-haired man appeared in front of him—Axel.

“What do you want?” Breathing hard, the Replica glared up at him.

“That hero was pretty strong, huh?” Axel smirked and took a step closer. “Even Naminé admits she likes strong guys, y’know.”

The Replica looked down, biting his lip. *What went wrong? …Why do I hate Sora so much?*

He only kept getting lost in his muddled memories.

“Well?” said Axel. “You’d like to get stronger, wouldn’t you, Riku?”

“How?”

Axel tossed a card at him.

“If you use that card you’ll be able to get some more power. How’s that sound?”

“…Why are you helping me?” said the Replica, staring at the card that he let fall to the floor. It was entirely black—no pictures or anything.

“Because I wouldn’t mind seeing the hero taken down myself.”

There was something else that Axel wasn’t telling him—the Replica felt that intuitively. But the fact remained that he didn’t have the strength to beat Sora as he was now.

“So, Riku, what’re you waiting for?”

The Replica picked up the card and headed to the door.

“That’s right—just hold the card up to the door. And then you’ll have the chance to become stronger.”

The Replica did as he said.

As Axel watched, a smirk came to his face, and then he vanished.

After making his way through Traverse Town, the city of meetings, he came to a world where lotuses bloomed in profusion. Riku didn't think he had ever seen it before.

"Whose memory is this…?" he grumbled, swinging Soul Eater at the Heartless. Whether the memories were there or not, the Heartless—and the darkness—kept coming after him. So he had to keep fighting them.

If he couldn't defeat the darkness in himself, there wouldn't be any future. Riku kept running with single-minded resolve.

Donald looked around in the empty marble hall. "I kinda thought Riku would be waiting for us…"

"Gawrsh, it doesn't look like he's here," said Goofy. "Maybe he doesn't feel like fightin' with ya anymore after all?"

They were both looking anxiously at Sora. So far, Riku had been waiting to jump out at them every time they'd made it through a world, but this time he wasn't here.

"I sure hope so," Sora sighed as if to himself, frowning.

Three figures watched the scene in a crystal ball.

"So what's going on, Vexen? I thought Riku was under your control—so where is he?" Larxene arched her finely shaped eyebrows and stared expectantly at Vexen.

Beside her, Axel smirked. "He's hiding somewhere to lure Sora deeper into the castle, right? I suppose we should just leave it at that."

He turned to Vexen. Right about now, Riku—or rather, the Replica—should be wandering through the worlds. All his plans were in order, Axel thought smugly.

"I'm *so* sorry," Larxene taunted Vexen. "It's just hard to tell whether your research is supposed to be of any use whatsoever."

Vexen began to tremble with rage. "Silence!"

"Aw, you hate being told the truth, don't you? Simpleminded for a scientist!"

"As if *you're* one to talk…"

The internal squabbles between those two were also entirely within the range of predictability.

And then—another major player appeared on the scene.

"Enough." The one who stepped in to interrupt Larxene and Vexen was no other than Marluxia, who was in charge of the castle.

Axel glanced at the man and folded his arms. In the periphery of his vision he

could see Naminé, staring at the floor and trembling like a cornered animal.

"Vexen, the fact is that your project was a failure," said Marluxia. "You had better not disappoint us again."

Color appeared in Vexen's sallow face, making him suddenly appear closer to healthy, and he stalked up to Marluxia as if he might seize him by the throat. "Disappoint *you*?! You go too far! In this organization, you are number eleven! While *I* am number four, and I will not be ordered around by the likes of you!"

"This castle and Naminé have been entrusted to me. Defying me will be seen as treason against the organization."

"And traitors are eliminated," Larxene added, grinning as if she couldn't wait to see it happen. "That's what the rules say!"

She was right. It was organization law. Treason meant death.

"I tell you, the project failed," Marluxia repeated. "And I must report that failure to our leader."

Their leader—a man who had once had another name with other memories… He was the actual fake. The one who had stolen the identity of Ansem.

"What— No, wait! Don't tell him that!" Vexen sounded as if he might fall to his knees and beg.

Marluxia made a small cruel smirk and told him quietly, "Perhaps we can work something out."

"How?" Vexen looked up.

"Eliminate Sora yourself."

Axel pretended to be surprised at the order Vexen received. Without looking straight at her, he was still focused on Naminé, who cowered in the corner, her thin shoulders trembling.

Through the door he found a world bathed in a beautiful sunset.

"What is this place…?" The Replica looked around, blinking in the blaze of the lowering sun. "What's going to happen here…to make me stronger?"

The atmosphere here was incredibly serene.

In this castle, people reclaimed their lost memories—that was what he'd been told, anyway, but he couldn't recall ever seeing a place like this before. Against the hopeless depths of darkness that filled up his own heart, this town felt so warm.

He began walking, unhurried. There didn't seem to be any Heartless here.

Suddenly the air wavered. "Huh?"

A blond boy on a skateboard zipped past him. The boy didn't seem to notice

the Replica at all.

"Hey, wait!" The Replica chased after the boy on the skateboard who hurtled down the town's gently sloping streets.

He came to a place that looked like an open square. Shops stood here and there—but no people that he could see. The Replica caught his breath and walked into the square. "What was that all about…"

The blond boy was nowhere to be found—as if he'd only seen a ghost.

The Replica wandered around the town painted red with the sunset. After a bit he came to a corner on the edge of town that seemed somehow neglected—there was a big hole in the wall.

"…I wonder if there's anything through here," he murmured and went closer.

After Riku finally made his way through the lotus forest, he met an enormous Heartless—the Trickmaster. He never flinched, but ran straight at it and jumped high and brought Soul Eater down on its arm.

"Why do I keep…running into these giant Heartless…?" Riku grated as he landed, and the Trickmaster swiped at him. Knocked back, Riku managed to catch himself and keep his balance, then he kicked off from the wall to slash at the Trickmaster again. His nails broke against the hard ground as he landed.

Still…he had to defeat this thing. He had to keep going.

To find Sora again…and to deal with the darkness inside him.

Through the hole, the Replica found a shadowy forest. He went slowly, looking around him all the while. A dark, dismal feeling dominated the place. *Almost like the inside of my own heart*, the Replica thought.

Why can't I beat Sora? …Why do I want to fight him at all?

Because Naminé hates him.

Naminé never wants to see him again. So I have to stop him from finding her.

It should have been a simple enough reason. And yet, for some reason, his heart felt so heavy…

The Replica reached in his pocket and clutched the charm from Naminé tightly in his hand.

That's why I have to defeat Sora.

In the distance through the trees, he could see sunbeams. He ran forward, as if trying to leave his worries behind.

His path brought him to a great big mansion.

"…Sora?"

There, up ahead, Sora and Vexen were facing each other down. Neither of them appeared to notice the Replica's presence. They were shouting about something.

"Well, well. What brings you here, Riku?"

The Replica turned at the sudden voice from behind him. Axel was standing there.

"What's happening here?" the Replica demanded. "You said I'd get stronger if I came here…"

"Huh, is that what I said?" Axel smirked.

"Did you lie to me?"

"I wouldn't do that… Take a look, Riku."

The Replica looked again at the scene between Sora and Vexen—they were just beginning to fight. With the help from his friends, Sora was certainly able to deal Vexen some damage.

"He is pretty strong, huh?" Axel remarked.

The Replica said nothing, only watching Sora. He *was* strong…but…

"None of that matters! Just make Riku go back!" Sora was shouting, with the Keyblade pointed at Vexen.

"Hmm. Looks like I'd better jump in," Axel muttered.

"Just *make him go back*? You really have no idea what you're saying," Vexen told Sora. "The Riku you speak of has but one fate—to sink into the darkness."

What…? I'm going to sink into the darkness…? Vexen's words struck the Replica with a deep unease.

"Hah, that wasn't in the game plan," Axel laughed, as if it weren't really much of a problem.

"…What d'you mean by that?" asked the Replica.

Axel gave him a nasty smile. "You go on ahead. I'll settle things here."

As he said that, the Replica found himself enveloped in darkness. "What—?!"

And then, before he could get out another word, he was standing in another hall.

"What just…?"

He had no idea what was happening.

Sink into the darkness?

And what's Axel up to?

What am I supposed to do?

His head was throbbing in pain.

“I hate Sora!” Naminé had said that.

Or…had she really?

His memories were getting more and more uncertain.

The one thing I know is…I’m going to protect Naminé from Sora.

So I have to beat him.

I have to save Naminé.

He told himself that, and a few minutes later…he sensed the presence of others.

It was Sora and his friends.

“If you go any farther, you’ll hurt Naminé,” the Replica told Sora, who had already passed by without seeing him.

The Replica said so, because with everything in him, he believed that was the truth. Nothing else *could* be true.

“You still want to fight?” Sora yelled, turning to face him. “But Vexen’s gone! You’re free now!”

Free from Vexen? Was he controlling me? A frown momentarily crossed the Replica’s face. But his feelings for Naminé easily drove out any doubts.

That’s right… I promised her.

“I’m protecting Naminé from you,” the Replica slowly told Sora, his sword raised. “That’s what’s in my heart.”

“We can protect her *together*!” cried Sora.

Protect Naminé *along with* Sora? That was impossible. Because Naminé couldn’t stand Sora.

“*I’m* the one who’s keeping her safe! I made a promise to her!” the Replica shouted.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

That night…I made a promise to her. I did.

“There was a meteor shower one night when we were little… Naminé got scared and said, ‘What if a falling star hits the islands?’ So I told her, ‘If any falling stars come this way, I’ll protect you!’”

“But that story’s the same as Sora’s!” Goofy exclaimed almost before the Replica had finished talking.

“What are you talking about?”

“But…that was the promise *I* made to her that night! I said I’d protect her!” Sora insisted, as if their memories could somehow be the same.

“Stop lying! You weren’t the one there that night!” the Replica snapped.

It was just the two of us…that time. Sora wasn't there.

"*You're* the one who wasn't there!" said Sora. "And she gave her good luck charm to me!"

"Her what…?"

"This!" Sora reached into his shirt and held it up—a charm exactly the same as the one he had.

"How did you get that?! Why do you— Oh. Good try, Sora." The Replica stepped closer, his sword still raised.

"…Huh?"

"That must be a fake. I've got the real one right here!" the Replica shouted and took out his own charm.

"Wha…? *Two* of them?!"

"Fakes should be destroyed!" The Replica leaped up and lunged for Sora.

"Whoa!" Sora barely managed to block the attack with the Keyblade. "It's *not* a fake! Naminé gave this to me!"

"*I'm* the one who's real!" As if in defiance of Sora's certainty, the Replica pushed him back.

And yet…

"*My* pendant's the real one!" cried Sora, swinging.

The Replica felt the impact from the Keyblade through his sword. It bowled him over. *"…Ngh!"* He winced, his shoulders heaving with huge breaths, as he got to his feet again.

Why…can't I win? Why…are our memories the same? Questions were swirling thick in his head. *What darkness am I going to sink into…?*

"Riku!" Sora cried.

Rejecting him, the Replica turned and ran—unaware that the pendant fell from his pocket and bounced on the cold floor.

That dim chamber in the castle basement…

Lexaeus appeared in front of Zexion, looking as if he'd just been somewhere else.

"Is something wrong, Lexaeus?" Zexion asked.

Something between displeasure and grief flitted over Lexaeus's face, but his voice, when he spoke, was perfectly calm. "Vexen is no more."

"Yes, I could smell it happening—the scent of Vexen snuffed out of existence by Axel. Members of the organization striking one another down. I find it deplorable."

Whether or not Zexion truly felt that way was impossible to tell from his cool expression under the feeble light in the basement.

“Our problem is Sora. Vexen proved to be no match for him—yet he’s still under Naminé’s control. Before long, the hero will be no more than a puppet for Marluxia.” Lexaeus lowered his gaze.

“What are we to do, then?” said Zexion, relentlessly questioning. “Shall we eliminate Sora before he falls into Marluxia’s clutches?”

“Eliminate Sora…” Lexaeus’s eyes went wide at those words. “There is no need for that. If Marluxia obtains the power of light, then we obtain the power of darkness.”

“…Riku. Of course.”

Lexaeus nodded, then vanished again.

In the room with the crystal ball, Naminé sat on a chair in the corner, staring down.

Right about now…Sora should be heading to the island. I’m there on the island…to part him from the last shards of his memory.

“Naminé.”

She looked up to see Axel standing there. A member of the “organization”—but she had the sense there was something different about him, something not quite right.

“You’re all that he’s got left,” he told her gently.

Her gaze dropped. *I was the one who merged Sora’s memories to make that happen… But there’s nothing I can do. Not now.*

“If you don’t stop this, no one will.”

At that, she looked up again. She didn’t really know what he meant.

“How many times do I need to say it? You’re the only one who can help him.”

“But I… It’s too late.” Her voice was scarcely audible.

Everything was already in motion. How could she stop it now?

“You shouldn’t give up just yet.” Axel moved closer to her, peering into her face. “Say, Naminé—have you noticed? Marluxia doesn’t seem to be around.”

“What…are you saying?”

Axel smirked at her. “Just that there’s no one here who would want to get in your way.”

You’re saying…that you won’t stop me? she thought.

Slowly she got to her feet.

“Just make it count,” said Axel.

Naminé gave him a tiny nod and ran out of the room.

After watching her leave, Axel laughed softly. And then louder. “Ha-ha-ha! Now *this* should be interesting. So it was worth all that trouble after all!”

He went to the crystal ball to peer at the image of Sora.

“Now, then! Sora, Naminé, Riku, Marluxia, Larxene! It’s about time you gave me one hell of a show!”

Grinning to himself, he touched the crystal ball, and the image changed. It showed the Replica.

“And you, Fake,” Axel murmured, gazing at the image of the Replica running across a marble hall. “You’ll set the final act in motion…”

Naminé ran down the castle stairs.

Right now, Sora should be in one of those white rooms.

I have to hurry… I’m not going to make it.

Just as that went through her mind, something bumped into her. Thinking it must be an organization member, she braced herself—but it was the Replica.

“…Naminé!” he shouted, his face stark white.

Her shoulders began shaking. “Riku… I mean… Replica…,” she started. But her voice was so small that he didn’t even hear.

“You know, I— You said you hated Sora…and you never wanted to see him again… So I thought I’d keep you safe. But…he’s got the same kind of pendant that you gave me… What does it mean? Naminé, what’s going on?!” The Replica was shouting, clawing through his hair in raw confusion.

“…I…” She looked down for a moment, but then gazed straight at him. “I’m sorry.”

He fiercely grabbed her by the shoulders. “Sorry? Sorry for what?!”

“I made up your memories. They’re fake…and so are Sora’s,” Naminé told him, each word slow and deliberate. “I can control people’s memories… I’m a witch.”

“My memories…and Sora’s memories are fake?”

“I linked together the chains of your memories. I made them both. Your memories are fake, made with links from Riku’s memories… And I instilled them into the puppet that Vexen created.”

As what she told him sank in, the strength left him, and he sat down there on the floor.

“I’m sorry… I was wrong. So I have to go right now.”

“What are you talking about?!” he screamed, clutching at his head. “Naminé, tell me!”

“I don’t have time now. I’m sorry…Replica.” She turned away from him and ran.

“Naminé! Wait! *Please!*”

She didn’t look back.

“Naminé!”

No one was there anymore to hear the Replica’s cries.

When Riku finally reached the great hall, it was filled with an awful stench. Sensing an unsettling presence, he stopped and stood ready with Soul Eater.

“That smell… You’re another one of those ‘Nobodies,’” said Riku, and then the Nobody revealed himself.

“I am Lexaeus. You’ve done well thus far. But to possess your powers and yet fear darkness… What a waste.”

Riku scowled. “I do *not*…fear it!” he said as if to convince himself. “I’m—”

“I sense that you do,” Lexaeus interrupted, quite unperturbed. “You’re also capable of controlling the darkness. Cast away your useless fear. Open your heart and embrace the darkness.”

“And if I don’t?” Riku retorted, steadily closing in on Lexaeus.

If he embraced the darkness, he would become stronger—but he didn’t need that kind of strength. He only wanted to use his own strength.

Lexaeus gave him the briefest of smiles and raised his heavy ax-like sword. “Then, you lose both light and darkness—and disappear!”

Enormously powerful darkness radiated from him, fierce enough to make Riku think of Ansem.

Riku grunted as the pressure of it slammed against him.

“I, Lexaeus, will not yield to the frail heart of an infantile coward! Now, stop resisting—and let the darkness in!”

“Never!” Riku brandished Soul Eater and rushed at Lexaeus. “I am not afraid of the darkness!”

“Ha! Nonsense! You can become stronger… But if you do not accept the darkness…you will be destroyed!” Lexaeus’s sword knocked Riku back and came down on the floor with enough force to cleave it, scattering chips of marble, which Lexaeus crumbled in his fist.

“Ngh…!” Leaping to avoid more flying shards, Riku sailed over Lexaeus’s head to land behind him, twisting himself just before he landed to slash at

Lexaeus's back. "How's this?!"

He struck Lexaeus a few blows until—

"This isn't over yet!" Lexaeus threw his weapon at Riku.

"Augh…!" The heavy sword bounced on the floor and came straight for him. "You…won't defeat me…and neither will the darkness!"

Riku had fallen to one knee, but he stayed low, and dashed in under Lexaeus's guard to stab up at him with Soul Eater.

"*Rgh.*.. To think…you had so much power…" Now Lexaeus dropped heavily to his knees.

Riku jumped back to put some distance between them, also out of breath. "What's the matter, Lexaeus…?" he said between gasps.

Even without using the darkness…I can still defeat you.

"Darkness isn't…all it's cracked up to be, huh?" Riku told him. "This fight… is mine."

Lexaeus gave him a cruel smile. "Hmph…so I must accept my defeat here. But do not make the mistake of underestimating the darkness in me! As I am destroyed, it will leave this ruined vessel and drown you!"

Then there was a terrible shock wave far greater than what Riku had felt from the darkness that Lexaeus radiated before the battle.

"Wh…what's happening?!" A relentless swirl of darkness surrounded him, swallowing him up until he disappeared into it.

Lexaeus laughed madly. "This is my strength… I, number five in the organization… I who was once his favorite pupil!"

Those were Lexaeus's final words before he vanished into the darkness.

He was in the dark. Nothing but darkness, on and on forever… Riku stood there alone.

"What…happened to me?" he murmured, trying to look around. "Where am I?"

A whisper replied to him. "I see you now…clearly…"

"Lexaeus?!" Riku cried.

The whispery voice seemed to be mocking him. "Riku… I can see your heart."

"No… It's not Lexaeus," Riku said to himself. "Darkness this foul could only be…him?!"

That presence…that stench. He knew it.

"Ansem!" he shouted.

That name—it might as well be the name for the darkness that was lodged inside him.

The voice laughed at him. “You called out my name, Riku. You have been thinking about me…”

It sent a chill down Riku’s spine. Those memories…he would rather forget. That revolting feeling in the moment when Ansem had taken over his body…

“You are afraid…of the darkness I wield. Good. The more you think of me… the nearer my return draws. And when I have awoken, I will take hold…”

Riku involuntarily shrank back. It felt like the darkness was closing in, suffocating him. Closing in…on his heart.

“And your heart will be mine to command!” As the voice said that, the man himself appeared—Ansem.

Riku couldn’t move, as if that cold stare turned him to ice on the spot.

How could he escape the darkness? How could he escape Ansem? The terrible gaze pierced him through.

Then he heard another voice. “Riku! Fight! Don’t let him win!”

As Riku heard it a ray of light shone on him. “Your Majesty…!” he cried, and the light grew, turning everything bright.

“You meddlesome king!” Ansem’s shout faded into the light.

Riku woke up, groaning, to find himself in the hall again. He felt a little unsteady, but nothing hurt.

“The king… He protected me?” he murmured, getting slowly to his feet. “Your Majesty, where are you? Please, answer me!”

He looked frantically around the hall, but the king was nowhere to be seen now. Or heard, either.

“But you’re with me, aren’t you…?” Riku’s hand, at his chest, curled into a fist.

“Remember, Riku, you’re not alone.”

He thought he could hear the king’s voice quietly telling him that… And he started walking again.

It can’t be true, the Replica thought. *My memories, all fake—that can’t be true!*

He ran as if to chase after Naminé, even though she was long gone. He had to make her take back those words. And he had to keep her safe from Sora.

Sora’s memories are the fake ones…

He opened the door only to find yet another marble room. But in the middle

of it, Naminé and Sora were talking.

I have to protect her from Sora… That was the only thought in his head.

"Because I went into your memories and—" Naminé was saying.

"Let *me* explain this!" the Replica interrupted.

"Riku!" cried Sora, startled.

"Plain and simple," the Replica went on. "Your memory is a train wreck. You're not the one who's meant to protect Naminé. That's me! But here you are, getting led astray by all those false memories!"

He lunged for Sora, his sword poised to strike.

"No! Stop it!" Naminé screamed. But the Replica never heard her.

Sora grunted and blocked his blow with the Keyblade.

"*I'm* the one who will protect Naminé!" The Replica jumped back and then swung at Sora again with renewed momentum.

"C'mon, Riku! We don't have to do this!" Sora shouted.

As if in refusal, the Replica knocked him back hard.

"Sora!" cried Naminé.

"*Ngh…* Riku…" Sora was trying to get up.

The Replica walked steadily closer to him. "Looks like I win." He held his sword over Sora's head.

"Riku, don't!" Naminé shouted again.

Oblivious, the Replica swung. "You're through, you impostor!"

"NO!" As she cried out, a flash of light filled the room.

The Replica's vision blurred. He made a tiny, pained sound, and everything wavered. The strength went out of his legs.

"Promise?" It was Naminé's voice from somewhere far away.

"Riku…?"

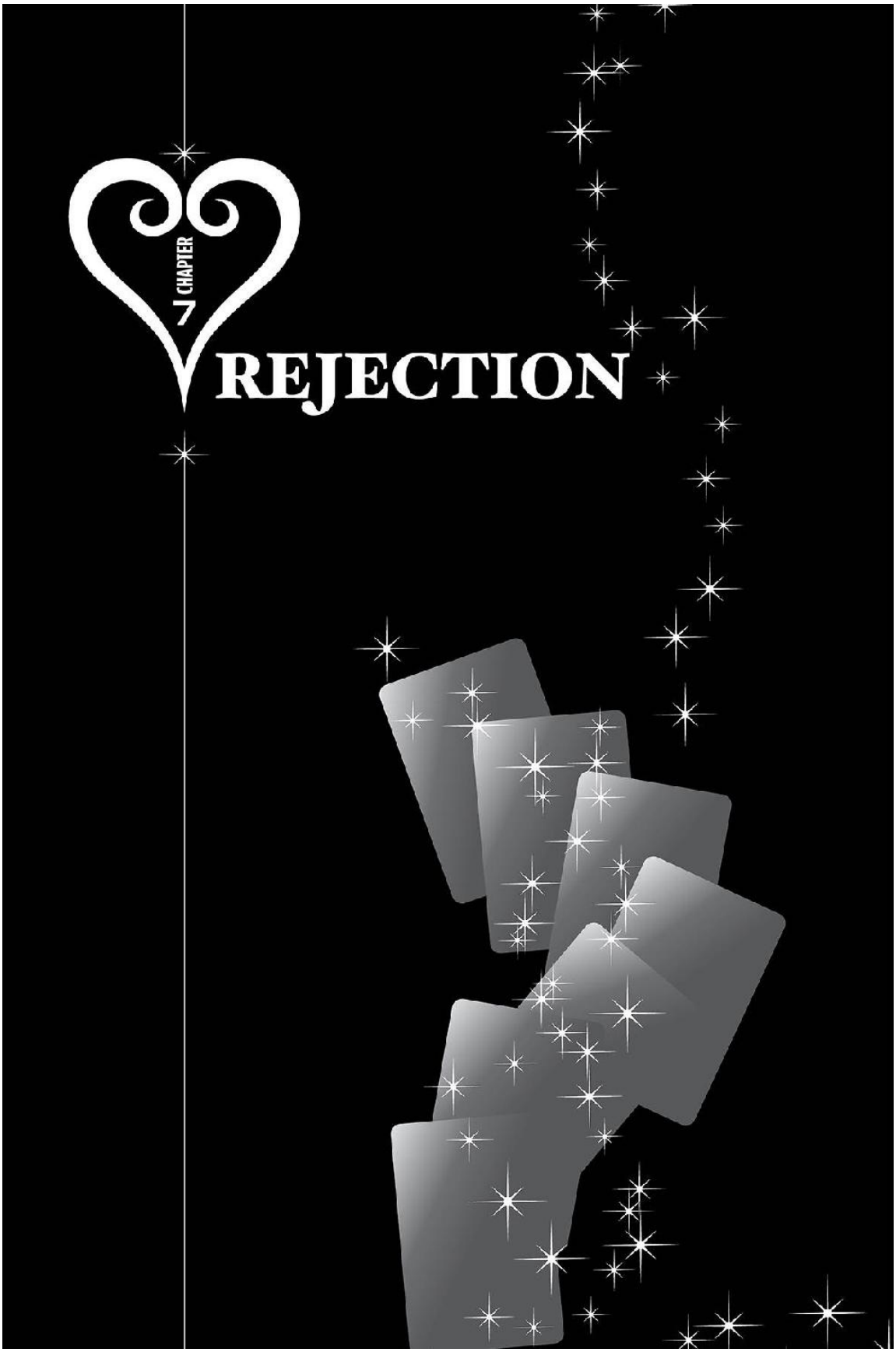
He could hear Sora calling his name. But…he didn't understand. *Am I…?*

"Riku! *Riku!*"

Sora's voice was so distant…

I hate you. Why are you calling my name like that?

And then he lost his hold on consciousness, and he was sinking.


CHAPTER 7
REJECTION

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“VEXEN AND NOW LEXAEUS… WHAT’S GOING TO BECOME of the organization…?” Zexion murmured.

As if perfectly timed in response, the air in the chamber wavered. Zexion looked up, and there was Axel, who should have been somewhere aboveground.

“Naminé’s betrayed you. Sora eliminated Larxene.” Smirking, Axel stepped closer. “The question is which one of us will be next to fall.”

Zexion frowned in distaste and spoke without looking at him. “…It might be you.”

“Me? I doubt that.” Axel folded his arms. “You see, just before I got here, I pretended that Sora beat me to a pulp enough to make me disappear. So, I won’t be fighting him again, at least for a bit.”

The way Axel said the words *for a bit* caught somehow in Zexion’s mind, but he didn’t ask.

“Which means the next to fall will be Marluxia,” Axel went on with a faint smile at his lips.

“Sora beat you, so there’s no way he’ll lose against Marluxia—is that what you think?” said Zexion.

Even though he had been placed in charge of the castle, Marluxia was only number 11 in the organization. And while a higher-ranking number did not necessarily indicate greater strength, Axel, who ranked at number 8 and was closer to *him*, saw Marluxia as a lesser opponent.

“I’m saying that Marluxia tried to use Sora to take over the organization,” said Axel, as if concluding an argument. “Sora will be the one to eliminate him.”

At that, Zexion looked up to press him further. “Then…our reason for obtaining Riku is no longer valid.”

“Are you saying we’ll have to dispose of him? You want to go up against Riku after he took down Lexaeus?”

It was not likely that they could win against Riku—not if Riku had defeated

Lexaeus, who had prided himself on the warrior's strength that let him hold his own against the highest-ranking members of the organization. Certainly not Zexion himself. He never had the slightest intention of facing Riku head-on.

"I'll do things differently," Zexion replied, a slight smile coming to his normally expressionless face.

"I'm sorry…Riku."

As he sank deeper and deeper into the darkness, the Replica was sure he heard that voice.

He wasn't Riku… And yet, he was glad to hear Naminé call him that, he thought dimly.

We did make a promise, didn't we? On the night of the meteor shower, I promised I'd protect her.

"You are my crime…and my punishment."

Don't say that! he wanted to scream. But he couldn't. If he did, it would hurt Naminé.

"If only somehow my prayers could reach you…"

They are reaching me, Naminé! See, I'm already free.

Light shone on the Replica. It was the light of Naminé's hope.

"Where…?" the Replica heard himself say, and then consciousness returned. It was the same great hall in which he'd fainted before. "Naminé…?"

It must have been Naminé who had called to him. But she wasn't here.

"What…happened to me?"

All he knew was that he was not Riku. He was a fake, created as a copy of Riku.

But…that didn't matter. Only one feeling filled his heart—the wish to protect Naminé.

The Replica began to run…to where Naminé must be.

"I'll have all my friends' memories, so I can piece my own together again!" Sora was shouting at Marluxia and Naminé.

It sure would be nice if I could do that…, the Replica thought.

Marluxia snorted derisively at Sora's claim. "Ignorant fool. When Naminé uses her powers to erase your memory, you'll be nothing but an empty husk! Your heart will no longer feel or care about anything! Just like that pathetic imitation of your Riku!"

As Marluxia was ranting, the Replica dashed in under his guard. *My heart*

can still feel! And it can still care about people!

"I wouldn't be so sure," he said evenly and slashed up with his sword.

The unexpected blow knocked Marluxia to his knees. "It can't be—!"

"Riku!" Sora ran toward him.

The Replica didn't turn. "No. Only an imitation."

And he pointed his sword at Marluxia again.

"You're a shell—a husk who had everything taken! Everything!" Marluxia spat.

"What did I ever have to lose in the first place? Both my body and my heart are fake," the Replica replied, sure of himself now. "But there's one memory I'll keep—even if it was just a lie! Whether it was a phantom promise or not…I will protect Naminé!"

She stared at him silently.

Everything else in the Replica's mind was false. Only that was true.

"Riku…!" Sora stood beside him and likewise faced Marluxia with the Keyblade ready.

"Imbeciles…!" Marluxia got to his feet. "You would knowingly shackle your heart with a chain of memories born of lies? You would cast aside your heart's freedom?!"

You're wrong, the Replica thought. *There are memories I don't want to lose. That's why I was able to wake up.*

I haven't cast aside my heart's freedom. I only chose to have those memories. And I was able to choose because my heart is free.

Pale pink flower petals began to swirl around them.

"You turn from the truth because your heart is weak… And you will never defeat me!" The petals took the shape of an enormous scythe in Marluxia's hands, and he swung it at Sora and the Replica.

"Ngh—!" A step ahead of Sora, the Replica managed to block it. "Sora, now!"

At his cue, Sora leaped into the air to bring the Keyblade down on Marluxia's head. But Marluxia flung the Replica back and raised his scythe in time to ward off the blow.

"That's not all I've got!" cried Sora, jumping up again as soon as he landed. "Donald, Goofy!"

As if they'd timed it all from the start, Donald hurled a spell at Marluxia. *"Firaga!"*

And just as he did, Goofy charged. But a storm of flower petals swirled

around Marluxia and tore through the hall.

“Look out!” Without sparing time to think, the Replica picked up Naminé and jumped out of the path of the petal cyclone.

“Riku…” In his arms, Naminé was looking up at him as if she might start to cry.

“I’m not Riku,” the Replica told her, his voice low and firm, and let her down behind a pillar. In the middle of the room Sora and his friends were getting tossed around by Marluxia’s attacks.

“Thank you…Replica,” he heard Naminé say from behind him. He was already running back into the fray to swing his sword.

Marluxia knocked him aside with the giant scythe. “You’re only a replica, after all… You’ll never strike a blow against me!”

He raised his arms and pink flower petals choked the hall again. Catching his balance, the Replica ran into the lee behind a pillar, breathing hard, and waited for the storm to pass.

“How do we hit him?!” yelled Donald.

“Don’t lose your cool—there has to be a way,” the Replica replied. Then, he found a break in the storm and darted in like a needle to charge at Marluxia. “Sora, now!”

“Wha…?” said Sora, hesitating.

The Replica looked back and shouted, “Trust me! C’mon!”

“Okay!” Sora hurtled after him.

Marluxia swung the scythe as if he’d been waiting for them—but the Replica caught it with his sword. “What?!” Marluxia sputtered, taken by surprise.

They couldn’t afford to miss the opening. “Jump, Sora!” cried the Replica.

Taking the cue, Sora jumped into the air and swung the Keyblade at Marluxia’s head.

Neither of them could have stood a chance alone, but together—no, with all four of them—they just might be able to take him down.

Even if it’s just for now—we’re fighting on the same side.

“Donald! Let’s have some magic!” the Replica called.

“Right— *Firaga!*” Donald let loose a fireball.

Then the Replica added, “Goofy! This way!”

Goofy ran in at Marluxia. Having knocked aside the Keyblade, Marluxia raised his scythe to block the fireball—and then Goofy was there to ram him with his shield.

“Aaargh!” Marluxia wavered on his feet.

“Sora! Now!”

The Replica and Sora both launched, their weapons striking Marluxia at the same time. The moment the Replica felt an impact of a blow landing, Marluxia’s body turned to a cloud of flower petals—which whirled about and finally scattered.

“Is he…gone?” Goofy nervously peered at Sora.

“Looks like it.” Sora faced the Replica, holding up his hand, palm forward.

Somehow he felt a little silly about it, but the Replica met the high five.

Donald jumped in triumph. “We did it!”

“Now we can get our memories back!” Goofy smiled at Naminé, who came out from behind her pillar.

“No… Not yet.” She shook her head.

“She’s quite right. What you destroyed was only an illusion of me.”

In the back of the room in front of the big door, flower petals swirled together, coalescing into a humanoid shape—which became Marluxia.

“So what!” The Replica rushed at him, swinging his sword, but Marluxia only disappeared in another cloud of petals.

“*Tch.* Another imitation!” the Replica fumed. A single card drifted to the floor in front of him.

“…Does that mean the real Marluxia is through there?” Sora picked up the card and turned to Naminé.

“Yes,” she replied with a tiny nod.

“I knew it. I can feel his power…like it’s going to explode any minute,” Sora murmured.

“Then we gotta do something before it goes off!” said Goofy, though he sounded as cheerful as ever.

“Let’s go, Sora!” Donald waggled his wand, impatient.

“Yeah…” Sora turned back to the Replica and Naminé. “Riku… You protect Naminé.”

He was smiling as he said that. As if he trusted the Replica with anything.

The Replica almost wanted to run away from it. He had to look away from Sora, and his voice was small when he said, “You don’t…mind?”

He was nobody—his memory was fake, his very existence was a sham. A being with no self. But Sora was talking to that person as if they’d always been friends. It hurt.

“Should I?” Sora only grinned mischievously.

“All right.” The Replica turned to Naminé. She gave him a tiny nod and

smiled. He nodded in reply.

“Don’t forget your promise,” Naminé said to Sora.

Those words made the Replica’s chest ache.

“I know. I’ll keep it!” Sora nodded, determined.

“Sora! C’mon!” said Goofy. The trio stood in front of the door, and Sora held up the card.

He had no idea what was happening beyond the door. All he knew was that enormous forces were clashing there.

The Replica and Naminé stared at the door in silence.

“Sora will be okay, right?” she murmured, barely audible.

The Replica turned to her. “He’s your hero, isn’t he? If he made a promise to you, there’s no way he’ll lose.”

“…You’re really nice, Riku.” Naminé gave him a shy smile.

It was a smile he knew from his memories—the same as when she’d given him the good luck charm, the Replica thought sadly.

That memory and these feelings…none of them are real.

He didn’t want to look at Naminé’s smile. He turned away.

“Thanks, Riku… I mean, Replica.”

He said nothing, only staring into space.

As Riku headed for the next floor, he felt a shock wave and a rumble that went through the floor like some colossal creature roaring.

“What is that?!” he yelled. After a bit the rumble quieted, and the castle returned to its usual stillness.

But then, Riku noticed something. “One of those scents has died… A really strong one. Huh?”

Someone was there to answer him. “The keeper of this castle, Marluxia, has just fallen to the Keyblade master,” said the man who suddenly appeared, approaching Riku.

“Keyblade… You mean Sora! Sora is here?!” Riku demanded.

The man only blinked at him, distinctly unimpressed by his outburst. “Yes. Do you want to see him? Or rather…*can* you face him?”

“What’s *that* mean?” Riku shot back angrily.

“Darkness—indeed, Ansem’s shadow—still nests within your heart. Do you intend to face Sora like that? Are you not ashamed?”

Riku hung his head. He should have overcome Ansem back then. But

everything around him was still reeking of darkness.

"Sora's fate is to battle the darkness," the man went on. "He must oppose anyone who hosts darkness in his heart—that is, you. If you refuse to believe me…well, you had best see the truth for yourself."

Riku caught the card that the man tossed his way. The picture on it showed a little island, dotted with palm trees, in the blue sea.

"This card! This is our—"

"Yes. It is your home. Now, go and grasp the truth." With that, Zexion left him.

Gazing at the card in his hand, Riku murmured the name of the home he still missed. "Destiny Island…"

Sora had finally defeated Marluxia. He and Naminé exchanged a smile. The Replica looked on in a daze.

"You okay, Riku?" Sora asked.

Startled, the Replica looked up. "I'm not Riku. I'm a fake. I can't remember why I was created or where or when… All that's inside of me is memories of you and Naminé." He shook his head, and his gaze dropped again. "But I know they aren't real."

"Say, Naminé, can't you use your magic to get Riku's memory back to normal?" Goofy wondered.

"Well…I…," she started, but then only hung her head miserably.

The Replica was only a copy created out of nothing. To get his memory back to "normal" would only erase everything.

"It's all right. I'll deal." He turned away from them and started to leave.

He had no idea what to do. Or even what he wanted to do.

"Wait!" Sora cried.

The Replica stopped to listen.

"Who cares if someone else made you? You're you and nobody else. You have your own heart inside of you. Those feelings and memories are yours and yours alone. They're special!"

Sora's words were so well-meaning. The Replica held back the tears that welled up in his eyes, but didn't look back. "You're a good guy, Sora. I don't have to be the real Riku to see how real your feelings are. That's enough for me."

Right now, that's all I need, the Replica thought. *It's enough that I got to meet Sora for real.*

“Riku!”

When Sora called that name he began to run, as if he had to get away from it.

Finally, the Replica stopped running and stared hard at his feet.

His body was fake…and his feelings, too. And he envied the real Riku from the bottom of his heart.

Sora’s friend, Riku. The one who truly had the power of darkness.

Even the darkness that surrounded him was fake…

“Hey there, Riku.”

He looked up. “…Axel.”

“Say, don’t you want to become the real thing?” said Axel, coming toward him with a smirk.

The real thing— If that was possible, he wanted it.

The Replica silently nodded.

Riku stood on the beach, feeling the breeze coming in from the sea. This was where he and Sora would chase each other, then fall and roll around in the sand…

He hadn’t known how badly he missed it all, even the breeze.

And yet, back then he’d wanted so badly to leave this place.

The sound of the waves that had been so monotonous—now it felt so sweet and welcoming.

Riku noticed some other people and ran that way. “Hey!”

Wakka, Selphie, and Tidus were there up the beach. But when he shouted at them, no one reacted.

“What’s with you guys?” he asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen the three of you so quiet.”

They only stared at him.

“What, is there something on my face?” said Riku, trying to shrug it off—and then they disappeared, as if they had only been a mirage. He saw his hand reaching out to where they’d been standing and curled it into a fist, looking down at the sand.

Maleficent’s words echoed in his mind.

“Your heart is steeped in darkness. And you can only see those who exist in that same darkness—like myself.”

No. That was all a lie.

Riku ran up the beach, heading for the dock. Maybe he would find Sora or Kairi waiting for him there. That place couldn't be steeped in darkness…

He dashed up through the little shack and out to the dock. He saw Kairi standing there, smiling…or he thought he did.

"Kairi…"

Just like the others, she only stared at him in silence.

"Hey, Kairi. Are you…?"

But as soon as he began to speak, Kairi vanished. In her place appeared the man who had given him the card—Zexion.

"Surely you knew this would happen," he said as if to admonish Riku for something. "You've been to a number of worlds in your memory before this one. And in those worlds, you met only dark beings. That's all that is left in your heart—dark memories. Your memories of home are gone."

"That's a lie! I remember everyone from the islands! Tidus and Selphie and Wakka! And Kairi and Sora, too! They're my…" Riku hung his head, his fists clenched. "My…best friends…"

"And who cast aside those friends? Have you forgotten what you yourself have done? You destroyed your home!" Zexion shouted, and darkness enveloped them.

Riku felt fat raindrops pelting him. Thunder crashed in the sky…and the world itself was crumbling.

"The islands where you grew up were sundered, scattered—so many hearts lost to the darkness. And it was all your doing!"

It's true, Riku thought in despair. *If I hadn't given in to that temptation… If I hadn't believed what that man said…*

"You hated spending your days trapped on these little islands, and so without a thought, you opened the Door of Darkness and destroyed them. It was *you*! You let darkness pull you in, and now, you belong to it."

No! Riku wanted to scream, but no words came out, and he sank into a crouch. He could see the image of himself that night standing at the bridge over the inlet.

What had he been thinking then, gazing out at the blackened sea? He couldn't remember. As if he was laughing at himself, he turned sharply with a bitter smirk.

"You should look—look upon what you truly are!" Zexion called.

Before his eyes, Riku's past self was engulfed in a horrific swirl of darkness

—and grew into something vaguely human-shaped but made of pitch-black shadow—changing into a Darkside.

“This… This can’t be what I really am!”

The shadow’s fist swept down toward him, but Riku didn’t dodge the blow. It sent him sprawling.

“This is…my true form…?”

I don’t know what I really am.

His fists balled tight, Riku looked up and saw something shining before his eyes. “Huh…?”

It was the glow of the Keyblade, and its wielder was standing there.

“Sora?!” Riku got to his feet.

But when he did, Sora attacked him.

“Stop it, Sora!” he shouted desperately, managing to block the Keyblade. “Don’t you recognize me?!”

“Yeah, I do. I can see exactly what you’ve become!”

“Augh!” Another blow from the Keyblade knocked Riku down. He couldn’t see that giant shadow anymore—did that mean it really was himself?

“How can the light hurt you? Have you really become a creature of the dark? You’re not Riku anymore—just a pawn of the darkness.” Full of regret, Sora kept the Keyblade pointed at him. “It’s time for you to face the light!”

A fierce glow radiated from Sora. Just like a shock wave of darkness, it had a terrible power that bowled Riku over and pressed in on him.

“I’m fading… Fading away…into the light…?”

If he was a creature of darkness—if he couldn’t fight the darkness with his own strength—then there was no other way but for Sora to destroy him, Riku thought hazily.

And if someone had to destroy him…he would much rather that Sora do it than anyone else.

“You won’t fade,” a girl’s voice rang out into the stillness of his sinking consciousness. *“You can’t fade. There’s no power that can defeat you.”*

“…What?”

Someone was there holding his hand. But everything was so bright that he couldn’t see who it was.

“The light won’t defeat you, and the dark won’t, either. So don’t run from the light…and don’t fear the darkness. Because together they will make you stronger.”

Surrounded by light, the girl pulled Riku to his feet.

“Make me stronger…,” he murmured. “The darkness, too?”

“Yeah. Strength that’s yours. The darkness inside your heart—it’s vast and deep…but if you can truly gaze into it and never try to look away, you won’t be afraid of anything.”

The brightness began to subside, and he could almost see the girl—she looked like Kairi, but she also looked like someone else.

“Just remember to be brave. Know that the darkness is there, but don’t give in. If you can do that, you’ll find your strength—a kind that’s unlike any other. You’ll be able to escape the deepest darkness, and you’ll be able to see through the brightest blinding light. Darkness will show you the way. Follow it and you’ll find your friends.”

Riku nodded firmly. His dearest friends…Sora and Kairi and all the others. “…But can I face them?” he wondered.

“Don’t you want to?” she said with a hint of a smile.

“You know I do. And I will! With my own strength—my dark strength!” Riku lifted Soul Eater high. “*Darkness!*”

Soul Eater gave off a dark glow. It cut through the surrounding brightness… and then he could see Zexion standing there. He slashed out at the silhouette.

“Im-impossible! How did you find me, trapped in the light…?” Zexion sank to his knees.

“You reek of darkness… Even the light can’t block that smell,” said Riku. “I guess you could say I followed the darkness right to you.”

Zexion weakly pulled himself upright. “Hm… After all your protests, you’re still like us—on the side of darkness.”

“I know who I am.” Riku held the point of Soul Eater to Zexion’s throat.

Even if darkness does live inside my heart, I’m still me. It doesn’t change who I am. If the stench of it won’t go away no matter what I do, then I might as well use the strength it gives me.

“When did that happen?” Zexion taunted. “You were always terrified of the dark…”

“Not anymore!” Riku brought Soul Eater down on him once again.

“*Rgh.*.. You fool!” Zexion put up the hood of his cloak, hiding his face, and vanished.

“Running away…?” Riku muttered.

Overhead, the ominous black clouds parted and light shone down. It was the warm, mild sunlight of Destiny Island.

Riku stepped forward…to face the darkness in himself.

Zexion made it back to that chamber where his colleagues once had gathered, hunched over and breathing harshly.

"What *is* he?! No one's *ever* taken in the darkness the way that he can! It's absurd…!" Collapsing to hands and knees, Zexion pounded his fists on the floor. He rarely let himself show any emotion. He didn't know someone else was there to see it—but then he saw the watching figure. "Wh… Riku?!"

He shrank back. Riku—if it really was Riku—looked down on him impassively. And behind that figure stood Axel.

"Oh… Oh yes. Vexen's replica, of course," Zexion remembered, as if clinging to the idea. "Perhaps we can use this Riku to defeat the real one… Axel?"

The Replica only stared down at him, showing nothing.

"Say, Riku…," Axel began. "It must be rough, knowing you're a fake. Wouldn't you like to be real?"

The Replica slowly turned to face Axel and nodded. "Yes."

That's right… He wants to be real—to become Riku.

"Simple. All you need is the kind of power that the real Riku doesn't have," Axel told him with a smirk. "If you get that, you can be a new person—not Riku or anybody else. You won't just be a copy of someone. You'll be your *own* self."

Crouched on the floor, Zexion scurried back. "Axel! What are you telling him?!"

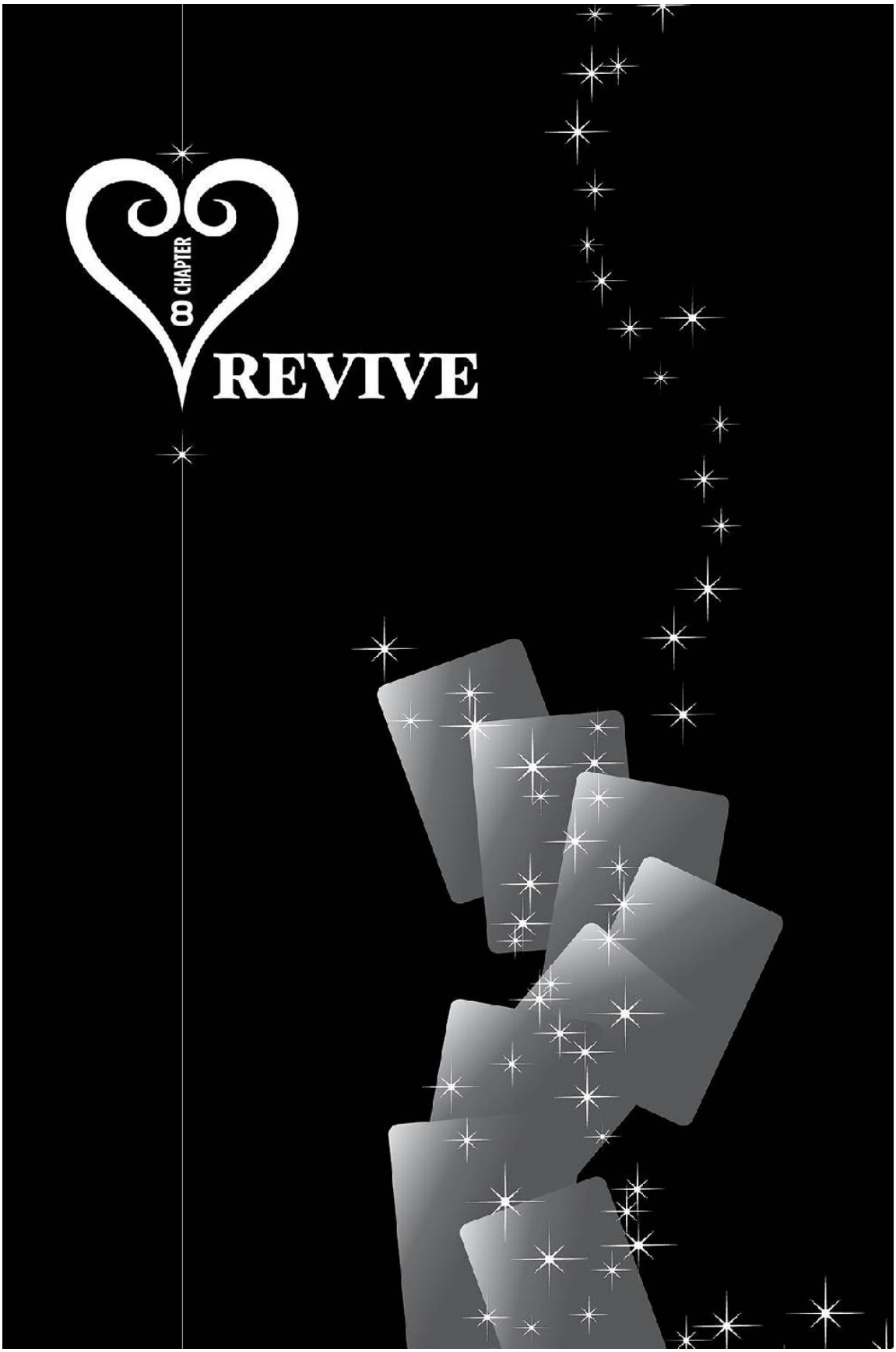
"You know, he's as good a place to start as any." Axel tossed his head, gesturing toward Zexion with his chin.

"You can't do this!" Zexion cried, not bothering to try to hide his panic.

Axel didn't even seem to hear. He put an arm around the Replica's shoulders and smiled brightly. "So sorry, Zexion. I could help you, but…watching Sora and Riku have it out is just so much fun."

"No… Stay back!" Zexion tried to back away farther, but the Replica swung his sword. *"NO!"*

His scream faded into nothing, swallowed up by the darkness.


8 CHAPTER
REVIVE

CHAPTER 8

REVIVE

RIKU WALKED THROUGH THE SPACIOUS HALL on the way to the next world.

He wasn't afraid of the darkness anymore. There was darkness, and there was light—and both of them made him what he was. He understood that now.

"Riku… Riku…," a voice called.

He stopped, looking around. "Who's there?!"

He knew that voice. And that smell, too.

"I know you can feel it—the grip that I have on your heart. You have let in the darkness, Riku."

It was the voice inside him—the whispering of Ansem.

"Yes… And that means your very heart itself will become all-consuming darkness."

"I'm not like that now!" Riku shouted.

Once he'd lost a fight to Sora and couldn't accept what it meant. But he was a different person now. His heart wouldn't be swayed anymore by Ansem's temptation.

"Oh, but you are," Ansem replied, undaunted, and Riku's body began to float off the ground.

"What's happening—?!"

"The deeper the darkness runs inside you, the stronger I become. Controlling you is effortless."

As he heard those words Riku found that his body wouldn't obey him—he was paralyzed, unable to move a muscle.

"No—" He finally managed to squeeze out a word, and then a sphere of white light began to drift down toward him.

"What?!" Ansem's voice was shocked.

The light circled Riku and glowed brighter. He fell out of Ansem's control as if strings that held him up were cut, tumbling backward and hitting the floor with

his behind.

“Must you interfere again?!” Ansem raged, but the stench of his darkness grew fainter, and Riku could move freely again.

“Whew! Sure glad I made it in time! That oughta keep Ansem busy for a while.” The ball of bright light settled in front of Riku and took shape—it was King Mickey. “Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner, Riku.”

The king was looking down at Riku with a smile, where he still sat sprawled on the floor, and he could hardly believe it. “Your Majesty… It’s really you?”

“Uh-huh!”

Riku eventually got to his feet and uncertainly leaned over to poke at the king’s belly.

“Whoa!” King Mickey yelped.

But Riku kept poking him. The fact that the king was really here made him happier than he knew how to say. He grabbed the king in a hug.

“What’s the big idea? That tickles!” King Mickey laughed, wriggling.

Riku laughed, too. “You’re not an illusion this time. I’m so glad you made it here.”

Finally he let the king down and weakly sank on the floor again himself.

“I promised you that I’d find a way, didn’t I?” said the king, looking straight at him.

“Yeah… Sorry. I’m okay. I guess I’m just relieved. I’ve been alone for so long that actually not being alone feels…well, it’s nice.”

The king felt warm. He was really here. It was so long since Riku had been around anyone else for real…it made his heart pound. Slowly he got up again, laughing at himself a bit. “But how did you make it here?” he asked. “I thought it was too far.”

“I found a card to help me.” The king took it out to show him. “I needed a way outta the realm of darkness, and then all of a sudden, this card appeared right in front of me. When I picked it up, I could see your heart beyond the darkness. That’s what let me find you.”

“This card…?” Riku took the card and looked at it closely, at the picture of a big clock tower and a train. It was a place he’d never seen before.

“I guess the card thought its place was to be with you,” the king added.

“…Maybe you’re right,” Riku said quietly, turning to him.

“Okay, Riku. Let’s go.” With that, the king looked a little more stern, determined.

“Right.” Riku climbed the stairs and held the card up to the door.

The twilight lingering in the sky cast a beautiful glow on streets lined with brick buildings. A deeply peaceful atmosphere pervaded everything, unlike any town Riku had ever seen.

“What is this place? I’ve never been here before…” He turned back to look at the king. “Have you ever seen it, Your Majesty?”

But the king wasn’t there. He was nowhere to be seen.

“Huh? Your Majesty?”

“That little king is gone.” A voice rang out in the quiet streets.

Riku whirled to see Ansem there and automatically fell into a fighting stance with Soul Eater.

“You must fight all alone…against my dark powers!” Ansem called.

But Riku only let his stance relax.

“What’s this? Are you giving up? Finally ready to surrender to your fate?”

Riku shook his head. “You’re not the true Ansem. I can smell it.”

Ansem narrowed his eyes.

“The Ansem in my heart smells darker. Nastier. But your scent…just isn’t that.” Riku took a deep breath, staring hard at whatever stood before him wearing Ansem’s shape. It wasn’t the scent of darkness—it was something else. Something with more kindness, something that smelled *right*. And he knew it from somewhere.

“I finally understand,” said Riku. “You’re the one who guided me when it began. You came to me pretending to be Ansem, and you gave me the card…to make me face the darkness.”

“That is correct.” As the man spoke, some kind of mist rose around him. Then, it slowly dispersed—to reveal someone else.

The man’s face was swathed entirely in red wrappings like bandages, leaving nothing of his expression visible. But the one eye that peeked out gazed straight at Riku.

“DiZ, or so I am known. I have been watching you all along.” The man’s voice was deep and even.

“Really,” said Riku. “Who are you? And what do you want from me?”

DiZ folded his arms. “For you to choose.”

“Choose?” Riku echoed.

“You are special. You exist between light and darkness… You stand in the twilight. You must meet Naminé and then choose.”

“Naminé?” Riku couldn’t recall hearing that name before. “Who’s that?”

“You will soon know.” With that, DiZ was gone.

“Hey—wait!” Riku ran forward, but there was no trace of him—not even a scent. “…Who is Naminé?”

For a moment, he hung his head in confusion, but then stood tall and started walking again.

There was no one in this town. No Heartless, either. And yet it didn’t feel at all lonely or neglected—it still felt somehow welcoming. *What a strange place*, Riku thought.

At the edge of town, there was a wall with a big hole in it. He could smell something from through there. The scent was tinged with darkness—but there was something else, too.

Could it be Naminé…?

He climbed through and found himself in a dusky forest. From far through the trees, light shone. He began to run toward it.

The Replica ran.

This town bathed in the evening glow, where Axel had led him—he had a vague memory of it. This was where Sora and Vexen had almost fought. And then…Vexen had fallen.

Axel had told him that he would be able to gain new powers from destroying Zexion. And even if he couldn’t become the real thing, if he got those new powers, he could be something else—not a fake, not a copy of another person.

But was it really true?

He wasn’t sure.

New powers did nothing to change the fact that his heart was empty. He was still the same… And if there was a way to change anything, it would probably happen when he destroyed the real one, the Replica thought.

If I can do that…something will change, right?

The Replica went through the hole in the wall at the edge of town and ran through the shadowy forest. Axel had told him that if he went to the place where Vexen had died, he would find Riku.

And when he found Riku…when he fought Riku, maybe something would change.

The sunset shone red on the tall gate. Beyond there, Riku could see a white mansion.

“…Maybe Naminé’s in there,” he murmured.

From behind him, someone spoke. “Hold it.”

Riku turned, and staring back at him was a copy of himself—the Replica, out of breath as if he'd come running.

"Hmph. You've changed. Your own darkness doesn't frighten you anymore." The Replica raised his sword.

"How can you tell?" said Riku, not bothering to raise Soul Eater in return.

"Because I'm you." The Replica edged closer.

"No, *I'm* me," Riku shot back.

The Replica paused, smiling a little. "'I'm me,' he says… Must be nice being real. A fake like me could never get away with saying that."

Then he jumped and slashed out at Riku, who barely managed to block.

The Replica was strong—much stronger than when Riku had fought him before.

"Not bad, for a fake!" Riku flung him back, but the Replica spun in the air to regain his balance and landed in a crouch.

"That's right, I am a fake—just a phony!" the Replica shouted, standing tall. "The way I look, the way I feel, everything I remember! And even this newfound power!"

With those words a dark aura rose from him.

It was evil and a scent Riku knew—the man he had just been fighting on Destiny Island.

"I took his power—Zexion's power, it's mine now. But still…!" The Replica leaped up again, swinging his sword, and Riku felt the ringing impact through Soul Eater.

Riku stared into a face that looked exactly like his own. And yet—it was different somehow.

"I thought finding some new strength would let me become someone else—someone who isn't a copy of you! But nothing changes… I'm still empty!" the Replica cried, pushing Riku back hard.

Riku crashed into the gate and fell.

"Everything about me is borrowed. As long as you're around, I'll never be more than a shadow!" Breathing hard, the Replica lunged for Riku again.

"So what? I'm me," said Riku. "And I won't let you defeat me!"

He parried and tackled the Replica to the ground. And then he had Soul Eater at the Replica's throat.

"So…it's over…," the Replica grated.

"It will be if you keep going."

"Hmph… Death doesn't frighten me," the Replica said stonily. "Good

riddance to a phony life."

He wasn't afraid of being destroyed. He was afraid…of forgetting.

And of being forgotten.

Will Sora remember me? he wondered. *Or will his memories of me get mixed up with the real one, so he forgets that I existed?*

"My heart was never real. Even what I'm feeling now is probably all fake." The Replica smiled faintly and light began to surround him.

"What are you feeling?" Riku asked, staring down at the copy of himself.

"What happens when a fake like me dies? Where will my heart go? Maybe it'll just disappear." The Replica gazed up at the sky.

The warm red sky over this town was so beautiful. *A nice thing for a last sight*, the Replica thought.

"It'll go somewhere," said Riku. "Maybe to the same place as mine."

The Replica's mouth curled in a bitter smile. "*Tch.* A perfect copy to the very end. That's…okay."

But as he said that his voice seemed serene. Enveloped in light, his body vanished.

Riku picked up Soul Eater where he'd let it fall and looked back behind him.

The gate was open as if to invite him in. Slowly, almost cautiously, Riku stepped through.

Inside the mansion, everything was dim and shadowy. There was no sign of anyone here, not even a scent.

"Is this the right place…?" Riku wondered. He crossed the spacious entrance hall and climbed the stairs to the second floor and went into a room at the end of the corridor. Inside was a white room, almost like all those marble halls in the castle. But no one was there. He peered closely at a picture pinned to the wall. It was a drawing on white paper torn out of a sketchbook, showing himself and Riku laughing together.

"Who drew this…?" Riku murmured, reaching up to touch it, and the moment his fingers brushed the paper it began to shine. "Huh?!"

The light surrounded him…and when he came to, he was standing in another bright white room. There, quietly gazing at him, was a girl with pale blond hair.

"Are you Naminé?"

"Yes." She gave him a tiny smile.

He knew that voice…that scent.

This was the voice that had spoken to him when the darkness nearly

swallowed him up on Destiny Island. And the same scent. It was her, Riku was sure of it—Naminé. “I see…,” he said softly. “That was you.”

“Huh?” For a moment she looked confused.

“Never mind. It’s okay.”

“Um…” Naminé tilted her head at him ever so slightly. Then she said, “Please… Come this way.”

He followed. Past her, he could see some kind of device, taller than him and shaped like a flower bud. And Sora was inside of it.

“Sora!” Riku ran to it without another thought. “What have you done to Sora?!”

“Nothing. He’s only asleep. To get his memory back.”

“What’s that mean? Please tell me…”

Naminé nodded and calmly began to explain everything that had happened to Sora in the castle.

After she’d finished telling him about Sora, Riku stared at her for a moment without speaking.

Sora had lost his memory here in Castle Oblivion—and he’d gained new memories. But he had chosen to cast those new memories aside and return to how he was before he stepped into the castle.

That was all that Naminé had to tell him.

“So Sora decided to go back to how he was…,” Riku murmured, looking up at Sora’s sleeping face inside the pod.

“You have a choice to make, too,” Naminé said from behind him.

Riku turned to look at her again. “Why me, too? No one’s messed with my memories.”

“It’s not about your memories. It’s your darkness.”

“My darkness…?” As Riku said the word, the stench of it seemed to grow thicker around them.

“In your heart there is darkness, and in that darkness is Ansem. He might be at bay for now, but eventually, he’ll awaken, and he will take over you just like he did before. But I have powers you can use against him. My powers can put a lock on your heart. That way, Ansem could never escape from inside you.”

Riku looked up at Sora again. “What happens to me if I let you do that? Will I forget everything like Sora?”

Naminé said nothing.

“I will forget, won’t I?”

“The darkness in you will be sealed tight along with your memories. You won’t remember the darkness anymore. You’ll go back to how you were. Riku… You have to choose.”

Still looking at Sora, he made a tiny laugh. “He looks like he doesn’t have a care in the world… Will I sleep like that, too?”

“Yeah.”

Sora’s sleeping face was so peaceful. With a little sigh, Riku looked back at Naminé. “Figures. Sora always does what he wants. Whatever we were doing together, he’d find a way to slack off. Even when we were trying to leave the islands…I was the one doing all the work making the raft.” Riku closed his eyes, thinking of those far-off days on Destiny Island.

“Riku’s getting annoyed…” When Kairi had said that, he’d turned to see Sora’s clueless face. But just remembering that made him laugh.

“That’s it,” Riku decided. “When this slacker wakes up, I’ll tell him off. I told him to take care of Kairi, and here he is just taking a nap! But I can’t say anything if I’ve been asleep, too.” With his eyes open, he faced Naminé. “I don’t need a lock on my heart. I’m ready—I’ll fight Ansem.”

“But what if his darkness overtakes you…?” She peered back at him nervously.

Riku wasn’t nervous about that anymore. “If that happens, then the darkness will show me the way.”

“Yes…you’re right.” Naminé smiled, bright and certain.

“Why do I get the feeling you knew what I’d say all along?”

“I didn’t know. I hoped. I wanted you to face the darkness, because you’re the one who can.” Naminé clasped her hands together.

Riku shrugged. “So that’s the reason… That’s why you came to my rescue inside of all that light in the form of Kairi.”

“You knew?!” Naminé exclaimed.

“I knew when I met you. You and Kairi smell the same.”

Right…what he felt from Naminé was Kairi’s presence. He didn’t know why they had the same scent, but right now, he didn’t need to know.

He stretched his hand out to Naminé.

“Huh…?” she said.

Without a word, he took her hand and held it tight. “Look after Sora.”

“I will. I promise.” She squeezed his hand back.

“Okay. It’s a promise.”

Riku looked up again at Sora’s sleeping face.

See you, Sora.

He opened the door that Naminé led him to, and on the other side, King Mickey was waiting for him.

“So, I guess ya decided not to go to sleep, huh?” The king greeted him with a grin.

“How’d you know about that?” Riku asked.

“I heard it from DiZ.” The king turned to look at DiZ, who was standing there behind him, arms folded.

“You…know him?” said Riku.

“Well, I’m not quite sure.” King Mickey cocked his head. “Got a feeling that I’ve met him…somewhere…”

Riku stepped closer to DiZ. “Hey… Just who are you?”

“I could be nobody…or anybody,” DiZ said in his deep bass voice. “The choice is yours whether to trust me or not.”

“You sure do like pushing choices on other people,” Riku remarked.

DiZ went on as if he hadn’t heard. “You have pushed away slumber, making the choice to face Ansem.”

“Do you think that was stupid of me?”

DiZ’s slight smile was just barely visible between the wrappings over his face. “You have chosen your own path. My only part is to watch over you.”

“That doesn’t tell me much,” said Riku, almost offended. “Are you supporting me or turning your back on me?”

“That will be your choice as well. Believe what you want to believe.”

Riku stared hard at DiZ. *Believe…* That was something he hadn’t been able to do until Naminé spoke to him in the form of Kairi…until he found King Mickey.

“Just believe. The light’ll never give up on you. You’ll always find it, even in the deepest darkness!”

That was what the king had told him. But he hadn’t been able to believe. Maybe that was the one thing that Sora was able to do when he couldn’t, Riku thought.

But now…now he was all right. He could really believe…in the king, in his own strength, his heart, in the light, and in the darkness.

“This is a card that will draw out the darkness in your heart,” said DiZ and tossed Riku a single card. “Finish your business with Ansem.”

“If I use this, Ansem will appear?” said Riku.

But DiZ, instead of answering, only vanished.

“Hey, c’mon!” Riku ran toward where he’d been standing.

King Mickey spoke up. “We can defeat Ansem together!”

Slowly, Riku turned. “Sorry. I have to face him alone.”

“But why?” The king looked shocked.

“There’s no point in doing this if I can’t do it on my own. But…I do need a favor. If I lose to Ansem, he’ll enslave me. If that happens, use your powers to destroy—”

“Sure thing!” King Mickey cut him off. “I’ll be right there to save ya.”

“Huh? No, not that, I want you to dest—”

“No way! No matter what happens, I’ll be there to help ya. That’s what I decided. Unless…you don’t really believe I’ll come through…” The king was smiling broadly at him.

“It’s my choice to believe in you, Your Majesty.”

“And I believe in you, too. You’re not gonna lose, I just know it.”

“Thanks,” said Riku.

If the king said so, there was no way he could lose. *I know I can beat Ansem.*

Riku nodded firmly and turned to the door to hold up the card.

Through the door, the air was thick with the stench of darkness—Ansem’s smell.

“Show yourself, Ansem. I know you’re here. I can smell it.”

In response, Ansem slowly took solid form.

“I have watched you fight. I know your strength. Your skill with the darkness has grown. It has matured.” He looked down at Riku with a loud, cruel laugh.

“So, what about it?”

“There’s something I don’t understand… Why do you accept the darkness but still refuse me? You and I are much alike. We both follow where the darkness leads. Indeed…we are the same. So why? Does some part of your heart still fear the dark?”

“That’s not it,” Riku replied. “The truth is…I just can’t stand the way you *stink*.”

He stood ready with Soul Eater. He knew that when he used his full strength, the darkness would pour forth from him. But he wasn’t afraid of that anymore. Now he understood—all he had to do was believe in himself.

“You are a fool. You of all people should know my powers well by now.” As Ansem spoke, an enormous shadow rose behind him. It was the darkness that lived in his heart—or perhaps that was his heart itself. It took a vaguely humanoid shape, but more like a colossal Heartless, looming over Riku.

“Oh, I know. Or did you forget?” Riku retorted. “I used every ounce of strength you had to give—and Sora still beat me! Your powers aren’t all that impressive.”

Riku launched himself at Ansem.

“Very well. In that case—you will sink into the abyss of my darkness!” Ansem cried as if he’d been lying in wait. From behind him, the shadow struck down at Riku with its fist.

“—Ngh!” Riku raised Soul Eater and blocked the blow, but its terrible force nearly crushed him all the same.

But he would be all right. He trusted the king. And himself.

“Take this!” Riku pushed away the shadow’s fist and leaped for Ansem’s head. But the shadow swept him aside, protecting its master.

“I have nothing to fear from *your* power!” Ansem crowed.

“You think so?” Riku smirked and let the darkness free from within him. “I know how to *use* the darkness. But you only let it use *you*!”

He ran in to attack again.

The shadow slid around to block Riku’s way, swinging its fist—but Riku leaped atop it, using it as a step to spring off as he brought Soul Eater down on Ansem’s head.

“You imbecile!”

The moment Soul Eater struck Ansem’s body, darkness lashed at Riku. He raised one hand, trying to ward it off so he could see, and landed.

He must have hurt Ansem with that, Riku thought. He regained his balance and stood again, not wasting another moment before rushing Ansem again with Soul Eater out to slash at his side. “This is the end, Ansem…!”

“This…is hardly…the end!” said Ansem, even as he collapsed to one knee.

“You can’t beat me—and neither can the darkness!” Riku turned to see Ansem likewise looking back at him with a nasty smirk.

“Your darkness… I gave it all…to you… My dark shadow…lingers… Someday…someday, I will return!” Darkness burst forth from Ansem as he began to fade.

“Wha—?!”

That darkness would swallow up everything…but a ball of light appeared above Riku.

“…Your Majesty?”

“Gosh, Riku, I know you wanted to do this alone… But you don’t mind just a *little* help, do ya?” King Mickey’s voice rang out. The ball of light glowed brighter and brighter. “C’mon, Riku. Let’s get outta here.”

And then the light outshone everything.

“Did I…beat him?” Riku wondered, looking around.

They were in a marble hall like before. The king answered him gently. “You did it, Riku.”

“But…” He could still smell Ansem’s scent clinging to him.

“So, Riku, what happens next? Are ya goin’ home?”

“I don’t know. It’s still here. It’s really faint, but I can still sense him…” Riku looked away for a moment, then faced the king again. “I can’t go home until it’s gone. But I think his darkness might still have a hold on me.”

“Your darkness belongs to you. Just the way your light does.” King Mickey went on, his voice gaining strength. “Up till now, I thought darkness was

somethin' we should try to get rid of. But while I spent time with you, I changed my mind. The road you chose, it's like…darkness and light back-to-back. And for you I think they might come together in a way nobody's seen before. I'm wonderin' where that road leads. I'd like to see for myself. That is, I'd like to walk that road with ya."

Nobody had ever said anything like that to him before—that they wanted to travel with him on his path.

"Your Majesty, I…I don't know what to say…"

"Aw, you don't have to call me that. We're pals." The king grinned at him.

Still a little embarrassed, Riku rubbed the back of his neck but returned it. "Okay. Fair enough, Mickey!"

The king—or rather, Mickey Mouse—nodded to him.

EPILOGUE

DAYBREAK OF START & THE LAST EVENING

A SINGLE PATH STRETCHED ON THROUGH THE GRASSY field as far as they could see. It was impossible to say how far it went. But Riku and Mickey walked along it together.

They both wore black robes, the same as the members of the organization wore.

After some distance, the path split into three. At the place where it branched, a man stood waiting for them—DiZ.

"What are you making me choose now?" Riku asked.

"Between the road to light…and the road to darkness," DiZ told him, looking at the paths that split off to the right and to the left.

"Neither. I'm taking the middle road." Riku began to walk past DiZ on the path between.

"Do you mean the twilight road to nightfall?" said DiZ.

"No." Riku looked back at him with a faint smile. "It's the road to dawn."

Riku kept on walking, and Mickey ran to catch up.

What lay ahead of them was the daybreak path—the road to dawn. And a new journey would begin.

Walking the path without you, so that we might remake our forgotten promise. So that I can find you on the road ahead.

The boy stared at the setting sun. He would watch the sun go down from the clock tower that rose above the station, and each time it was just a little bit different.

Something was about to change… The thought hazily crossed the boy's mind.

"Roxas!" He could hear Pence calling his name from the bottom of the tower.

"Coming!" he called back and turned away from the blaze of the sunset to run down the tower stairs.

The sinking sun cast its last rays behind him.

Reverse/Rebirth – The End

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